

Virtue and vice

Gardens and gambling, heritage and hedonism, Chinese and Portuguese, skyscrapers and street food – Macau might be a double-faced city, but that is what draws us to this ultimate fun destination over and over.

Text **Lucy Corne**

▲ St Dominic's Church at the Largo de Sao Domingos. The pastel-coloured church was founded in 1587 by Spanish Dominican priests and is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Normally I might feel guilty about such a hedonistic evening. Having got lucky on the roulette table I was enjoying my winnings with a glass of bubbly and a gourmet sandwich filled with all the things I'd been struggling to find in China, while dancing girls strutted their stuff in the background. But since I'd had such a pious morning it seemed only fair to enjoy an indulgent night out.



Macau on a budget

You might not be able to afford to join the high rollers, but in fact the casinos make Macau a viable destination for those seeking to save a few patacas. Free shuttle buses to get you to the tables are a great way to get around, while free cups of tea will keep you refreshed while watching a cabaret show in the bar or enjoying some live music – all gratis. Cheap clothes stores and street eats offer a budget-conscious alternative to nearby Hong Kong and if you're cheeky enough to gorge on the complimentary samples of Yuk Gon, almond cookies, peanut brittle and ginger candy dished out along Rua de Sao Paulo, you could skip lunch altogether. There are true budget sleeping options in the old town's former red light district, but for a real bargain, check out websites offering massive discounts on top-notch hotels. You might find a five star room for as little as US\$100.

▲ Above: The Ruins of St Paul's, a 17th century Portuguese cathedral that is now a World Heritage Site.

Right: Macau is Asia's Las Vegas, and the credit goes to the innumerable casinos. Seen here is the Casino Grand Lisboa, one of the oldest in Macau.

Time-warped

Macau is a city of glorious contrasts, quickly noticeable in the unique skyline—an odd juxtaposition of 17th century churches and the over-the-top opulence of the glitzy, neon-emblazoned casinos. It seemed appropriate to start our trip by finding out how the city began, so after dumping our bags at a surprisingly well-priced hotel we headed straight for the Museu de Macau. Housed within the walls of the Fortaleza do Monte, the museum charts Macau's history, explaining why a little piece of Portugal clings to the southern coast of China. Of course, these days Macau isn't really a piece of Portugal, but architecture, cuisine and even a little of the language make the city stand out from many others in China, with its little European influences.

Seeking respite from the summer heat, we explored the museum, following Macau's story from prehistoric times, through the relatively amicable Portuguese years and up to the city's latest incarnation as a playground for grown-ups. After exploring the interactive exhibits we headed out to wander around the walls of the Fort, stopping for snaps of Macau's quirky cityscape. The cannons still remain, but



these days the vistas from the crenels are quite different to those that Macau's one-time defenders would have known. A mishmash of snazzy apartment blocks, office buildings and glass-fronted casinos. One thing that has not changed though is the imposing facade of the Cathedral of St Paul. Completed in 1602, the cathedral was gutted by an 1835 fire and today only the windowless frontage remains. Considered

most spectacular after dark when floodlights illuminate the melange of Jesuit and Oriental carvings, we decided to walk along Macau's side streets and wait for dusk to descend before getting up close.

One for hedonism

The Rua de Sao Paulo, leading to the ruins, is lined with heaving food shops, each peddling the same wares. Competition is fierce and vendors desperately force feed



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▲ Clockwise from above: Nezha Temple, close to the Rua de Sao Paulo, is said to be over 300 years old; A dash of green in the middle of a busy modern-day square; Yuk gon, a Macanese speciality of dried pork or beef strips.



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As the sun set, I marvelled at the sight of European architecture surrounded by neon Chinese slogans.

passers-by with samples of sweet meat cut from sheets. Yuk gon is a local speciality. Dried strips of chewy beef or pork that taste like honeyed jerky, coming in scores of mildly different guises. After munching on free samples and exploring the paved plazas and Baroque churches we returned to admire the ruins of St Paul's by night.

After dark Macau becomes a different place, where the focus shifts from godliness to gaming. The ever-more elaborate casinos steal the limelight from more sombre buildings and we were drawn to the most garish of them all: the magnificent Grand Lisboa. The mesmerising exterior resembles a giant neon firework and its interior is no less exuberant, boasting ostentatious chandeliers, grand pillars and faux gold fountains. As expected, the casino floor overloaded the senses with flashing lights, feather-clad dancing girls and a clash of soundtracks—the bleeping of slot machines blended with live music and show tunes. Staff ply gamblers with free cups of tea, but we opted for something a little harder, sipping champagne as we listened to a Macanese singer with questionable English, singing Frank Sinatra covers.

Keep your feet muddy

With virtue and vice ticked off our lists, we set out the next day to further explore Macau, focussing on the other wonderful contrast the city offers – the meeting of the East and the West. From our hotel on Coloane Island, south of the city centre, we hopped on a bus to explore away from the standard tourist routes.

We headed first for something you might associate more with Portugal than China, the beach. While Baía de Hác Sá doesn't quite live up to stretches of the Algarve, it also doesn't quite live up to its name (Black Sand Bay). Since the beach is gradually being lost to erosion, authorities decided they might as well replace the dark sand with a golden version, leaving a two-tone effect. Following a dip in the somewhat murky ocean we

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enjoyed a Portuguese lunch of chilli prawns with an oriental side dish of spring rolls.

Coloane Village provided the perfect follow-up to a surprising morning. Fiery red lanterns struck an arresting contrast with the pale yellow paint work of the church of St Francis and we munched on Cha Siu Bao (Chinese pork buns) before seeking out a European dessert. The long-established Lord Stow's Cafe draws locals and visitors for its delicious egg tarts, which many think is the greatest legacy the Portuguese left behind.

As the sun set on our weekend of contrasts I marvelled once more at the sight of European architecture surrounded by neon Chinese slogans. But I must admit that as I considered the distinct aspects of Macanese life, I was not sitting beneath the illuminated arch of a 17th century church. I was nursing a beer on the casino floor, enjoying a Macanese Elton John look-alike belting out "I'm still standing" in Cantonese. And if that's not a glorious mesh of cultures, I don't know what is.

▼ Below: Macau's egg tarts, a Portuguese legacy, are as famous as its casinos.

Above: The streets leading to the ruins of St Paul Cathedral are very busy and many local specialities can be bought here for a bargain.



Fact file

Getting there

Jet Airways operate daily flights from Mumbai and Delhi to Hong Kong. From there boats leave every 30 minutes for Macau, making the slightly choppy crossing in just over an hour (around US\$20 one way).

Accommodation

Most of Macau's accommodation options are four and five-star establishments with kitschy casinos attached. Huge discounts are often available, making it a great place to upgrade. Breakfast often isn't included, but Portuguese-inspired bakeries abound, so finding food in the morning is rarely a problem.

Travel tips

- Try to travel midweek, when you can find enormous savings on snazzy hotel rooms. If you're heading to Macau from Hong Kong, check out the discount hotel operators at the ferry port. It's a great place to score a cut-price sleeping option.
- Don't be afraid to take advantage of the free buses. Even if you're not playing that day, you'll probably lose enough in the casinos to warrant a few free rides around the city.

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