

MACAU

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MACAU

Macau, the first European enclave in Asia – established by the Portuguese and now a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China – is a cultural two-face with a more laidback and hedonistic streak than its sister SAR of Hong Kong. It is uniquely Chinese, but with an amicable Mediterranean charm.

In the last five years gambling in Macau has taken off like wildfire, drawing millions of Chinese punters to spend money in the only place where casinos are legal in China. It is now commonplace to refer to Macau as the Vegas of the East. Indeed, Macau has long since surpassed its American rival in gambling income. But Macau is much more than casinos. The 450-year Portuguese influence is still vivid: cobbled backstreets, baroque churches, ancient stone fortresses, art deco apartment buildings, and restful parks and gardens are everywhere, intermixed with numerous Chinese temples and shrines along the way. It's a unique fusion of East and West that has been recognised by Unesco, which in 2005 named 30 buildings and squares collectively as the Historic Centre of Macau World Heritage Site.

This arresting clash certainly reveals an impressive history, but Macau is not about spending all its time living on a bygone era. Big-name entertainers not only bring gaming tables to Macau, but also other forms of entertainment and cultural festivals, ambitiously positioning Macau to become Asia's leading arts and conference destination.

Long before the arrival of the city's own Michelin guide, which sparks controversies and gourmet tourism, food was always one of the prime motives for gourmets to make the trip to Macau. Apart from the new fine-dining scenes that have sprung up in big resorts, the unpretentious restaurants that serve hearty and home-style Portuguese and Macanese dishes are still the culinary drawcard.

Macau is just 65km west of Hong Kong, making it the closest getaway for Hong Kong residents. Travel between the two territories has never been easier, with high-speed ferries running about every 15 minutes (as well as frequent helicopter services). With time and patience you will be rewarded with something new at each step and on every visit, but even spending just a night or two will allow you to discover this hybrid city's unique lifestyle, temperament and cuisine that make it so much fun.

BACKGROUND HISTORY

Early Settlement

Archaeological finds from digs around Hác Sá and Ká Hó Bays on Coloane Island suggest that Macau has been inhabited since Neolithic times (from 4000 BC). Before the arrival of the Portuguese, Macau had a relatively small number of inhabitants, mainly Cantonese-speaking farmers and fisherfolk from Fujian.

The Arrival of the Portuguese

In 1510 and 1511 the Portuguese routed Arab fleets at Goa on the west coast of India and Malacca on the Malay Peninsula. At Malacca they encountered several junks with Chinese captains and crews. Realising that the so-called Chins – about whom Portuguese mariners and explorers had heard reports of

a century earlier – were not a mythical people but natives of 'Cathay' (the land that Marco Polo had visited and written about 2½ centuries earlier), a small party sailed northwards to try to open up trade with China.

The first Portuguese contingent, led by Jorge Álvares, set foot on Chinese soil in 1513 at a place they called Tamaõ, today known as Shangchuan Island, about 80km southwest of the mouth of the Pearl River. However, it wasn't until 1553 that an official basis for trading was set up between the two countries, and the Portuguese were allowed to settle on Shangchuan. The exposed anchorage there forced the Portuguese traders to abandon the island that same year, and they moved to Lampacau, an island closer to the Pearl River estuary.

To the northeast of Lampacau was a small peninsula where the Portuguese had frequently dropped anchor. Known variously as Amagau, Aomen and Macau (see the boxed text, [opposite](#)), the peninsula had two natural harbours – an