

China

Gambling on a Macau vacation

City rolls the dice on a new direction

It's a rags to riches story for old town

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MACAU, CHINA—The young man, smartly dressed in a new button-down shirt and pressed black pants, sports a smile as he rakes in his winnings.

Sandwiched at the blackjack table between a crusty-looking woman and an unsmiling older man, the 20-something hipster just pocketed 2,000 yuan (about \$350 Cdn.) in a single hand. It's not huge money by Western standards, but in a Chinese casino, it's a big win.

With the next hand he goes for broke, betting all his 4,000 yuan in chips. He gets a 10, then hits and gets an eight for an 18, a good narrow street. Macau sees it smiles at his fortune. But the dealer turns up a queen, then a 10, for a total of 20 — the house wins. The young man's smile becomes a look of shock. He grimaces and leaves the table in disgust.

It's a familiar story here at the Casino Lisboa, Macau's liveliest gambling house, where fortunes are lost more often than they are won. But the young man, like every other casino visitor here, is an indirect contributor to a remarkable turnaround.

If you take a walk down Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro, the heart of Macau — it's impossible not to notice that something big is going on. Huge tarps and bamboo scaffolding cover virtually every building on this long, narrow street. Macau sees its shares of typhoons, but with commerce at full swing in the trendy clothing stores that line the avenue, it's evident that what's happening isn't damage repair.

Down the road, the sports field across from the Lisboa has been torn down and construction is underway on a big casino — one of at least five new gambling establishments scheduled for a 2006 opening. Farther south, dump trucks and bulldozer crews are busy reclaiming acres of land from the South China Sea. While mainland China gets all the attention for its rapid growth and change, nowhere is that pace more apparent — and dizzying — than in this former Portuguese colony. With casino money, Macau is moving from rags to riches by turning itself

into the Las Vegas of Asia. It's a veritable renaissance, and in short, it's a great time to visit.

Over the past year, Macau has been getting a major facelift in anticipation of an inspection this summer by UNESCO. The historical organization will be scrutinizing a dozen sites for inclusion on its list of cultural treasures. Casinos, meanwhile, are springing up at a ferocious clip, greedily creating new land in the process.

Gambling, in fact, has been Macau's main income since the 1850s, but it's only since the colony's handover to China in 1999 and the subsequent elimination of Dr. Stanley Ho's casino monopoly in 2002, that Macau has started to prosper again.

The territory — a sliver of a peninsula adjoined by two small islands, consisting of about 28 square kilometres total — is already a fascinating blend of Europe and Asia. The narrow city streets wind up and down hills, with faded Portuguese colonial buildings — old churches, crumbling mansions and imposing fortresses — scattered amongst a maze of Chinese-style high-rises.

The streets themselves, with cobblestone mosaic patterns, are unlike any found in China. With the scooter as the vehicle of choice, Macau might as well be a city in Italy or Spain. The lack of massive traffic congestion and hordes of honking cars, the crisp sea air, and the attractive streets and architecture, make for a much more peaceful atmosphere than anywhere else in China.

Most of the non-gambling action centres on Largo do Senado (Senate Square), where Avenida de Almeida Ribeiro meets Avenida do Infante D'Henrique. The square houses some of Macau's finest Portuguese buildings, with the peach-coloured Sao Domingos church to the north and the stunning Leal Senado (senate building) to the south.

Sandwiched amid all this culture are, of course, dozens of shops. The West is well represented here, with McDonald's, Starbucks, a Body Shop and even a brand new Haagen Dazs outlet.

A narrow, pedestrianized street winds its way north from the square to Macau's most recognizable icon, the newly restored ruins of Sao Paulo, and the adjoining Fortaleza do Monte. Throngs of camera-wielding tourists flock here to see the magnificent facade of the 17th-century Sao Paulo church,

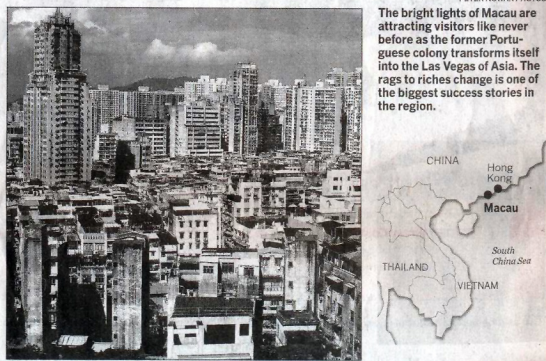


which was all but destroyed by fire in 1835. The fort, just up the hill, houses Macau's historical museum and offers spectacular views of the entire city.

Some visitors here have brought binoculars to take in the view. If they look hard enough, they might even be able to see all the disappointed gamblers — like the smartly-dressed young man — filing out of the Lisboa and the other casinos, likely unaware of the part they're playing in Macau's rebirth.

★ For more on tourism to Macau, visit www.macautourism.gov. Air Canada offers direct daily service between Toronto and Hong Kong and Cathay Pacific offers daily service from Toronto to Hong Kong via Vancouver.

Peter Nowak is a China-based freelance writer.



PETER NOWAK PHOTOS
The bright lights of Macau are attracting visitors like never before as the former Portuguese colony transforms itself into the Las Vegas of Asia. The rags to riches change is one of the biggest success stories in the region.

