



Variety SHOW



Macau may spell casinos, nightlife, flashy hotels for most and indeed there is a lot of that but step closer and you will see the picture has a few more, equally colourful, layers. **BY PALLAVI PASRICHA**



SOAKING IN THE beauty of verdant mountains, or walking on a beach, enjoying the sunset are more my kind of holidays. But the Sin City of the East cast its spell on me the moment I caught a glimpse of it from the ferry. Seeing the bold red sign of Sands Hotel, the Macau Tower, and never ending row of skyscrapers, I could gauge this would be fun of an intense kind. I was ready to savour every minute, and forgot all about the sea and the hills in the background.

The moment you step into Macau you know it's all about betting, winning, partying and living it up. Everything spells luxury here—right from the lion statue outside MGM Grand hotel, the bright golden lotus-shaped Grand Lisboa, gigantic crystal chandeliers at hotels, slot machines, poker tables, jacuzzis and whatnot. So I was not surprised when I stepped into an opulent room on the 12th floor at Sofitel Hotel, the only hotel on the waterfront. Seeing the South China Sea from my window, I couldn't help being thrilled, I could even catch a tantalising glimpse of mainland China.

I was told the casino city had much to offer besides the slot machines and dreams of winning big bucks at the gambling tables. And so began my tryst with this city, which had been under Portuguese rule before it was handed over to China as recently as 1999. A 10-minute walk from the hotel took us to Senado Square, part of the historical central square of Macau. The square is an intriguing blend of the ancient and modern, and even better, it is a shopper's haven. I went past fountains, browsed at designer label stores and at kiosks that sell everything from rubber bands and souvenirs to trendy bags. Too tired to shop, I took a quick look and made a mental note of what I wanted to buy when I came the next day.

Honestly speaking, the last thing I had expected to do in Macau was to visit temples, museums and churches! As I drove past the Inner Harbour area, I spotted many buildings in typical Portuguese architectural style—they reminded me of old houses in Pondicherry. Apparently, there was a move to pull them down to make way for more skyscrapers, but better sense prevailed and the gambling dens could not completely swallow the city's heritage.

Our first stop was at A-Ma, the oldest Chinese temple here. As I bent down to undo my laces, Alorino, our guide, informed that I could go in with my shoes on. What's more you can even smoke and drink inside this temple! I was taken aback. Imagine if I tried to do the same anywhere in India, it would certainly make headlines. But Macau is different, a happy blend of old and new.

A peek at history made me hungry, and soon enough we found ourselves walking down an alley filled with food stalls and shops offering everything under the sun—from dry fish, almond biscuits and cookies to a sweet offering that tasted very much like the chikki we have here. Youngsters standing outside the shops enthusiastically offered everyone passing by dry pork to taste!

Macau has an amazing zing to it. The city is full of colours and packed with people all the time, even on

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HOT DEAL

ZAIA SHOW

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CLOCKWISE FROM BELOW The MGM Grand Hotel; a glimpse of mainland China; a row of restored mansions called Taipa House Museum; Macau Tower OPENING PAGE Senado Square, one of the liveliest places in the city



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weekdays. Alorino told me that if I found Macau lively during the day, I should wait for evening when the city actually wakes up, and the lazy afternoons are replaced by the frantic clicking of slot machines and high value poker bets. But right now, all I could think of was lunch, which was a delicately flavoured fish steak with potato at Rossio, the Portuguese restaurant at MGM Grand.

Chinese cuisine being my favourite I had come to Macau looking forward to lots of it, but, was pleasantly surprised to find myself tucking into mouth-watering Portuguese and Macanese delicacies instead. Macau has borrowed dishes from Chinese, Portuguese and a bit of Europe and made its own concoction. The Macanese cuisine has melt-in-the-mouth fish cakes, a variety of seafood, breads and desserts.

Many photographs later and after much insistence from Alorino we made our way towards Macau Tower, the ubiquitous landmark of the city. The lift whisked us up a breathtaking 338m in mere 55 seconds—certainly a great

way to save time, although it is not too good for my ear pressure. My legs shook like jelly when I stepped on the glass floor and looked down at the vast sea and speeding cars beneath me. Macau was under my feet, literally! Luckily it was a clear day and I could get a bird's-eye view of the casinos and tall buildings, though I could not help thinking what would happen if, oh my god, the glass breaks. Seeing others I was briefly tempted to go sky walking outside the tower, but thank god, it was fleeting.

What good is a visit to the Las Vegas of the East if you don't try your hand at gambling? Thinking about this we made our way to the Grand Lisboa casino. My first tryst with this deadly addiction made me richer by 50 dollars and I felt as if I had won a fortune. My imagination ran wild thinking what I would do with all the money if I won a jackpot. After all you can't visit the city which spins hopes and dreams without living in them for some time, even if they come crashing down soon.

But you really don't have to be a night bird to enjoy Macau. Its magic grows on you even if you are not a serious gambler, and its compact

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STRIP SHOW

Who hasn't heard of The Strip in Las Vegas with its glitzy, high-end hotels and casinos? In Macau, the Cotai Strip that connects the islands of Taipa and Coloane is being developed the same way. Some of the hotels on the strip such as The Venetian Macao and Four Seasons are now operational, but many more—The St. Regis, Shangri-La, Hilton, Fairmont, Raffles—will open shortly. Also on the cards is the Cotai Concept Mall and a host of gambling options.



The opulent Grand Lisboa Hotel; RIGHT one of the many shops in Macau that sells everything from dry pork to delicious almond cookies FACING PAGE The Ruins Of St Paul's



PALLAVI PASRICHA

size—just 25.4 sq km—makes you soon feel as if you know the city inside out. My second day began perfectly; what can be better than a visit to a wine museum where you taste some of the best Portuguese wine?

A visit to Taipa Island gave me another glimpse of the city's colonial heritage. A drive on a long bridge across the sea took us to this island that still retains its old world charm. Besides being home to some of the most lavish hotels, the island was littered with Chinese shop-houses, and colourful buildings. Colours are more Macau's style—you just cannot escape them anywhere but this island even had buildings painted in pale yellow, green and pink. Save your appetite, for there are numerous restaurants and shops on the food street Rua da Cunha. I opted for sesame seed nuggets instead. I am a foodie but the smell of pork and chicken hanging in the air here can be pretty over-powering and put me off.

The evening found me back in Taipa Island, this time to watch another Macau special—the Zaia Show, billed as one of the most spectacular in Asia. What I saw for the next 90 minutes was a superb display of dance, movement and aerial acrobatics. The actors moved as if their bodies had no bones. I was astounded. The Venetian Hotel has built a custom-made, state-of-the-art theatre for this show with a seating capacity of 1800.

I was lured back to the casinos, the thought of all the green bucks waiting ahead was very tempting. Unfortunately luck was not in my favour this time. I lost most of the money I won the previous day and walked out before I could do further damage to my wallet. The night was still young and I wondered whether to pamper myself with one the famous foot massages. You can find foot massage parlours on every street, and they are easy to spot as most of them have neon-lit feet signs—but if you want a massage at bargain prices, you may have to trudge around for a while. Don't worry, it is safe at any time of the night. I finally decided to do without it, having lost my money to the slot machines!

I left Macau with my mind a montage of colours and experiences—a place where the old juxtaposed with the new, a million neon lights contrasted with pretty petunia flower baskets, and old churches and buildings were tucked in the backdrop of a skyline cluttered with sky-scraping hotels and casinos... a heady mix if there ever was one. ●

FACTFILE

GETTING THERE

Fly Delhi-Hong Kong-Delhi on Cathay Pacific. (Fare: Rs. 25,000 approx). From the Hong Kong airport you can take an hour-long ferry to Macau.

WHEN TO GO

Throughout the year.

PLUS SAYS

STAY

►Sofitel Macau at Ponte 16, Rua do Visconde Paco de Arcos Macau, tel: +853 8861 0016; www.sofitel.com

►StarWorld Hotel and Casino, Avenida da Amizade, tel:+ 853 2838 3838 www.starworldmacau.com

EAT

Must try the melt in the mouth egg tarts from Lord Stow's Bakery in Coloane Island.

SHOP

Portuguese wine from the Wine Museum.

SEE

You must visit a casino in Macau and try your hand at gambling. Apart from this the panoramic view of the city from the Macau Tower should not be missed.