

Viva Macau!

It's a weekday afternoon and I am standing, slack-jawed and agog, in the sparkling lobby of the huge Sands Casino. Directly over my head, suspended from a well-reinforced (I hope) ceiling, hangs what is purportedly the world's largest chandelier – a monstrosity of glittering glass and chrome that sends showers of twinkling fantasy light to the floor below.

Bustling all around me are many hundreds of high-octane gamblers making their way toward the casino's nearly 400 card tables. Dozens of red-eyed waiters attempt to swim in among them, and pokerfaced overseers keep eagle eyes on their silent, expressionless croupiers.

This is my third day in the No. 1 gambling city on the planet. But no, I'm not in Las Vegas. I'm not even in the state of Nevada. The impatient gamblers pushing past me aren't speaking English. They're chattering loudly in Cantonese or mumbling madly in Mandarin. I'm on a little peninsula on the south coast of China, in the charming old Portuguese colony of Macau.

Last year, Macau's booming casinos raked in a staggering USD 6.8 billion, which pushed it rudely past Las Vegas's earnings. And as new Vegas-style hotel-casinos continue to open – some of them doppelgangers of Sin City's best-known venues – the smart money says Macau will remain the world's top gambling venue.

For four centuries, the Portuguese had governed this beguiling little seaport, an important center for the lucrative Asia spice trade. Then, in 1999, two years after Britain handed over Hong Kong with pomp, fireworks and quivering upper lips, Portugal quietly returned its last Asian outpost to China

As the only place in China with legal gambling, Macau's potential is immense. Within three hours' flying time there

are more than a billion gambling-loving Chinese. That's why Vegas icons Sheldon Adelson and Steve Wynn are competing to build flashy new casinos faster than a you can say, „Hit me!“ Between them and others, American investment in Macau is expected to top USD 20 billion in the next few years, as dozens of new hotels and casinos come on line.

The boys from Nevada have made no bones about their goal. Adelson, owner of the Macau Sands and the soon-to-open Macau Venetian casino, said: „What took us 25 years to do in Vegas, we will do in Macau within three.“

For Western visitors, though, the big draw is the remnants of old Macau. And much of it still survives, including some of the most mouth-watering fusion cuisine on the planet.

It was as a young Hong Kong-based reporter in the 1980s that I first fell hopelessly in love with Macau. A densely settled peninsula packed with crumbling old Iberian architecture, plus two forested islands, Macau charmed me as an endearing relic, a place where I could still feel the fading footfall of a brilliant, bygone empire.

While modern Hong Kong, 40 miles away across the great Pearl River Delta, seemed bloated by its success, Macau was calm and quiet behind its shuttered windows, serene and exhausted with the strain of trying to maintain some bit of its 16th century splendor.

Impoverished perhaps, and woefully out of date, for sure, Macau was always welcoming. Over the years it has suffered from – and sometimes savored – a reputation as a haven for smugglers, Jezebels and spies. In the press you'd regularly read of bad guys with theatrical nicknames – „Twin-Nostrils Li,“ „Five Fingers Fung“ or the dentally challenged „Broken Tooth“ Koi. Macau was a Graham Greene novel come to life.

The voyage from Hong Kong used to take as long as four leisurely hours. But today visitors arrive aboard sleek, high-

speed Boeing Jetfoils that skim the waves at 70 mph on huge, ski-like hydrofoils and make the trip in half an hour.

As my Jetfoil approached the peninsula, Macau looked nothing like I remembered. The new Sands Casino was the first thing I saw, jutting rudely into the air like a great golden tooth. Half the harbor has been filled in, and scores of new high-rise buildings sprout everywhere. Virtually all the old pedicabs have been muscled off the roads by gleaming black taxis.

In just a few years, Macau's style and spirit have gone from Graham Greene to Donald Trump.

Many of the Portuguese have departed. The rest of Macau's population, the 99 percent of the city's half-million residents that are Chinese, are now coming to grips with the new Macau.

Stepping off the Jetfoil, I followed the furious flow toward the casinos. For old time's sake, I made for the neon-lit Lisboa Casino, the city's oldest. Once this busy harbor-front nightlife district had been the site of scores of pawnshops, their 24-hour purpose made clear by rows of gold Rolexes set behind polished plate-glass windows. Discreetly displayed on the bottom rows were sets of gold teeth. These uniquely Macanese artifacts always made me shudder: Who was the more desperate – the ruined gambler who'd sold his teeth for a ticket home to Hong Kong, or the sad sap who spent his unexpected windfall on someone else's golden choppers?

Alas, the pawnshops are gone, replaced by their insipid technological successors, ATMs. Some Macau traditions persist, however: Should you suffer a string of bad luck at the baccarat table and decide to borrow a few bucks from Macau's sympathetic loan sharks, you will still be frog-marched smartly to the pier and „accompanied“ back to your bank in Hong Kong. Your escorts will be two very large men, with a

colorful array of tattoos but severely limited social skills.

As I exited the Lisboa several hundred patacas poorer, I noticed that the great bronze statue of a one-armed Portuguese governor beating off Chinese assassins with a bullwhip was gone. It has been carted away to Portugal where it will, no doubt, terrify generations of Portuguese children, just as it did Macau's Chinese school kids.

While gambling draws China's newly – or at least temporarily – wealthy, Macau's seduction of Westerners has always been based on its enchanting Portuguese architecture and mellow Iberian ambience. Happily, despite a forest of high-rises, I could still see the old Guia Lighthouse, set on a hill above the arrivals pier. Built in 1637, the fortress today houses the oldest lighthouse on the China coast.

Also easy to find was the old Monte Fort. A faded plaque stands at its stone entrance. Dated 1622, it commands visitors in Portuguese to „Stop! Take heed! Consider briefly the beautiful history of our country. Enter proudly and hold your head high for you are a soldier of that country.“ At the Old Protestant Cemetery, I paused for a few moments to ponder the moss-covered gravestones of missionaries, merchants and seamen, poignant reminders of tragic, premature deaths in faraway, fever-ridden Asian outposts.

I was also keen to reacquaint my taste buds with Macau's unique cuisine, a marvelous mélange of flavors from Portuguese colonies in Africa, India, Malaya and China – a cooking style found nowhere else. My favorite by far is a delight called African Chicken. Invented in Angola, spiced up in Goa, improved in Malacca and perfected in Macau, this tongue-tingling, sweet-yet-wonderfully-spicy dish contains nearly a dozen ingredients, including fresh dried coconut, peanut butter, paprika, chili and black pepper.

I savored this historic dish in one of my favorite

restaurants, a little waterfront cafe called Henri's Galley, which has remained unchanged since it opened 30 years ago.

You merely need to look down to find old Macau just beneath your feet – the cobblestone streets are filled with the polished stones brought over from Europe as the ballast in 16th century galleons.

There are many pockets of the Old East: lovely old churches with flickering candles placed beneath sad-eyed saints, elderly antique restorers, traditional incense makers, skilled wood carvers. And the heart of old Macau still beats along the promenade of Praia Grande Bay, where courting couples still cuddle along the sea wall, hidden beneath the cooling shade of big old banyan trees.

True, there's now a Starbucks and a McDonald's just off stately, 500-year-old Senado Square. But Macau's many 18th century Chinese shop houses still offer a mind-boggling array of bizarre goods, from ships' chains to exotic-smelling Chinese medicines.

The Macanese remain as friendly as ever, and family-owned bakeries still produce Macau's superb Portuguese egg tarts. Chinese schoolgirls still giggle when buying the fragrant, coconut-flavored waffles that sizzle on a street-vendor's hot plates.

The Macau government has spent \$ 300 million renovating the best of the enclave's heritage sites, including the ghostly, ruined façade of Saint Paul's Church and the lovely, 200-year-old Camoes Garden. This little urban oasis has nothing to do with casinos, or tourists, yet it somehow sums up the quiescence of Macau and is a favorite place for musicians to practice Cantonese opera.

On my last night in Macau, a windy and misty evening, I walked alone along the pedestrian path to the center of the high, coat hanger-like Taipa Bridge. I wanted to see the cheery

lights of the little city one last time. Every seven seconds my old friend, the Guia Lighthouse – which in years past had guided me home after a long evening in some of those Graham Greene-ish nightspots – would flash its powerful beams across the dark waters.

Once, not so many years ago, I had watched bat-winged junks track gracefully across these waters. Though appearing barely seaworthy, these lissome boats had been sailing the South China Sea since the time of Christ. Just as I was about to leave, an old junk – motorized now, but still noble – appeared in the sultry darkness and passed beneath the bridge. I waited for many minutes, hoping to get a better glimpse as it came out the other side. But it never did.

Perhaps I misjudged its location in the dark waters. Or maybe it was just an apparition of timeless old Macau.