

# Dispatch from Macau

A far-flung correspondent finds he's not in Las Vegas anymore, the best efforts of Steve Wynn and Sheldon Adelson notwithstanding.

If you spend enough time inside Steve Wynn's newest billion-dollar resort, it's easy to convince yourself you're actually still in Las Vegas.

All the trappings of what we've come to expect from a top casino-hotel are here on the south China province of Macau: plush, colorful carpets framed by gold trim, immaculate rooms furnished with flat-screen TVs and high-thread-count bedding, a shopping arcade complete with outlets by Prada, Tiffany and Louis Vuitton. I even heard strains of Sinatra's "Luck Be A Lady," in the distance every so often last week as engineers tested the Wynn Macau's version of the Bellagio fountains. Even the fonts on the signs inside the hotel are exactly the same as the ones Wynn used for the Mirage, Treasure Island, Bellagio and Wynn Las Vegas, albeit with accompanying Chinese characters.

Yet peer out Wynn's office window and you see the rest of the story. The man who built a mountain around his latest offering on the Las Vegas Strip because he wanted to control every possible view, down here must stare out at a collection of decrepit apartment buildings that make that weird spaceship-looking atrium at the Fashion Show Mall look like a work by Frank Lloyd Wright. Walk not two blocks off the Wynn reservation and a shirtless man is operating a bicycle-fixing business out of an alley while his friend is shilling pirated DVDs for about one US dollar a piece. When I slipped into the local equivalent of a greasy spoon for a bite of authentic Chinese cuisine, the badly translated menu offered me mushroom dumpings, shedding ham soup, and spam toast or fish ball in hairly vegetables, whatever that might be. I looked up at the

wall to see the name of the place: The New Food Planning Management Company. I kid not.

All this is a way of saying that you're about to hear a lot about the reconstruction of Las Vegas in China. The Wynn opens on September 6, the Venetian Macao comes along this spring and the MGM Grand Macau is due by the end of 2007. Reporters will flock, as I did for Newsweek last week, and the lazy ones will describe a phenomenon by which Vegas is no longer a place but a product to be globalized same as Starbucks, Disneyland or Elvis. Las Vegas Sands CEO Sheldon Adelson is particularly ambitious and told me point-blank that he's "duplicating Las Vegas." He'll spend USD 10 billion all by himself for eight new casino-resorts and he's trademarked the term "Asia's Las Vegas."

That was exactly how I pitched it to my editors and for much of my trip I was convinced that that was the correct narrative. But armed with some dusty but workable Chinese from my years living in Beijing and freed of the confines of hired cars and indoor tours of the Wynn Macau and Adelson's first Chinese casino, the Sands Macao, I was reminded of just how far away I was from America's desert playground.

Beyond all that marketing talk, Wynn and Adelson know this, too. Las Vegas is what it is because everybody, the world over, wants to go there. They travel across oceans, they make it the highlight of cross-country road trips, they gravitate to movies, books, TV shows and podcasts about it. Its history, its lure, its distinct personality are endlessly fascinating. Everywhere I go in the world, when I tell people I live in Las Vegas a spark of electricity buzzes through the room.

To abuse a line from an entirely different context, I know Las Vegas. I've served in Las Vegas. And, Macau, you're no Las Vegas.

Some of the differences are charming. Chinese line up lucky

eights to win on slot machines, not sevens, per local superstition. The buffet at the Sands Macau is a genteel, healthy affair of various Asian renderings of chicken, beef and fish, with not a french fry or a prime rib carving station in sight. A Sands Macao spokeswoman giggled when I asked her if there were any craps tables, never having heard of the game and finding it funny that one would be called that. It's all baccarat almost all the time here.

But other differences aren't so cute. Macau is not a polished place; it's dirty, poor, polluted, swampy. It's somewhat dangerous; a spree of murders in the 1990s led to a regulation still in place that requires anybody entering a casino to pass a metal detector. And the tax revenues from these gaming operations will partly help fund a totalitarian regime at least as cruel and duplicitous as any other on Earth.

There is one weird thing Vegas and Macau have in common: They're both major battlegrounds for the bitter rivalry between Adelson and Wynn. What heretofore has been a case of headstrong neighbors feuding over parking, traffic and bragging rights has now gone global. Both want to be seen as the revolutionary who reinvented Macau and both have legitimate claims to that credit, but predictably they have very different approaches. Wynn hopes to turn around the downtrodden inner-city region I described earlier; Adelson is building his collection of resorts on an expanse of reclaimed land a few miles away that to him is a clean slate. It felt just like home listening to the two deride one another's plans on one dizzying day in Macau.

Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying the Macau thing won't work. It's a huge untapped market full of inveterate gamblers. It will only add to the Wynn and Adelson legends and largesses.

But what's going on in Macau isn't the duplication of Las Vegas. It's the Las Vegasing of Las Vegas. That is, it's Las

Vegas doing what it does best – knocking off a famous world destination. Except this time, it's knocking off itself. Simplistic observers mock Vegas for its ersatz Egypt, Paris and Venice, but the folks who built those places knew it wasn't possible to actually try to duplicate anything. It's far better to reinterpret, say, New York City, picking and choosing the landmarks and aesthetics rather than feeling obliged to replicate it.

So perhaps that's the best way to look at what's happening in Macau: It's Las Vegas paying homage to itself. I'm just not sure what they'll do with the spam toast and hairy soup.