

Macau a sure bet to become the Las Vegas of China

Beijing – Mainland China may not yet have a Broadway, but it has a Las Vegas: the former Portuguese colony of Macau.

A special administrative region at the mouth of the Pearl River, just an hour by ferry from Hong Kong, Macau soon could surpass the American gambling oasis as the model for future entertainment destinations.

„Before the handover of Macau from Portugal back to China (in 1999), Macau was already getting 5 million visitors a year,“ says Michael McCarty, sales director for the trade-show group of Venetian Macau, part of the Las Vegas Sands Corp. „Being a part of mainland China, but a little bit separate, is a powerful combination.“

Indeed. Flashy new hotels with brands such as MGM, Galaxy, Melco PBL and Wynn have sprouted up. The warm climate has drawn top-tier musical acts such as the Black Eyed Peas and Beyonce, and sports powerhouses such as the NBA’s Orlando Magic and Cleveland Cavaliers and the U.K. football club Manchester United. Tennis giants Pete Sampras and Roger Federer are expected soon.

That’s all aside from the gambling. And the Chinese love to gamble.

„Unlike Las Vegas, which has competition from Atlantic City, N.J., and Biloxi, Miss., Macau is the only city in all of China in which gambling is legal,“ McCarty says. „There isn’t a one-stop entertainment destination city in China like Las Vegas in America. That’s what we’re trying to do here.“

Sands is adding eight theaters along the Cotai Strip to a stadium that already seats 15,000, he says, adding, „Macau is

going to blow right by Las Vegas in the next couple of years.”

By some estimates, it already has. Figures show Macau's 2006 gaming revenue was greater than the take in Las Vegas.

But before one races into the future in Macau, it's worth peering back in time – into 450 years of Portuguese colonial rule. The mere HKD 175 (USD 22.50) it costs for the boat ride from the Ferry Terminal in Hong Kong's Sheung Wan neighborhood to Macau is well worth it. The 10.5-square-mile city of Macau is at once a collection of the most luxuriant modern casinos on the planet and an outpost of Mediterranean boutique hotels called pousadas.

If you like Old World charm, the whitewashed Mediterranean bed and breakfast called the Pousada de Mong Ha is the place to stay. Built in 1849, this traditional Portuguese inn of 25 rooms and suites is situated on a quiet hill overlooking the Macau harbor. For an exquisite meal of traditional Portuguese fish stew, piping-hot fresh-baked „pan Portugues“ and pitchers of sangria, ask the Pousada staff to put you in a taxi to Fernando's, about 30 minutes outside central Macau. It's wise to book ahead, especially if you want to reserve a table for al fresco dining with a view of the harbor.