

Macau set to surpass Hong Kong in visitor numbers

Hong Kong (Reuters) – The number of visitors to Macau jumped almost 23 percent last year, putting the fast-growing gambling haven on track to surpass neighbouring Hong Kong.

The tiny, former Portuguese-ruled enclave of about half a million people registered more than 27 million arrivals in 2007, up 22.7 percent from the previous year, according to government statistics.

Hong Kong registered more than 28 million visitor arrivals, an increase of more than 10 percent on 2006 and a record. If growth rates are maintained, Macau will take the lead this year.

The sharp rise in the number of travellers stopping in Macau highlights the radical transition the once-sleepy territory has made in the years since it was returned to Chinese rule in 1999.

Macau's leap ahead of Hong Kong in total visitor numbers would not necessarily be bad for the former British colony, said Andrew Chan, an assistant professor at the School of Hotel and Tourism Management and Hong Kong Polytechnic University.

Home to some 7 million people, Hong Kong remains the leader as a shopping destination and its airport is an unrivalled hub. Tourism contributes somewhere between 20 and 30 percent of Hong Kong's retail sales, economists estimate, and in 2007, it contributed an estimated 6-8 percent of GDP.

„Basically, I do not see it as competition. Rather, it strengthens the position of Hong Kong,“ Chan said, adding that the authorities should come up with ways to make it easier to travel between Hong Kong and Macau. „It will feed the market

for us.”

Ferries run regularly between Hong Kong and Macau, taking about an hour. By helicopter, the trip is about 15 minutes.

The Macau economy has boomed since a decades-long casino monopoly was dissolved and Beijing loosened travel restrictions on Chinese tourists from dozens of cities.

Several foreign-owned, Las Vegas-style casinos have gone up, including Las Vegas Sands' palatial Venetian Macau, which boasts the biggest casino on earth.

Not surprisingly, the biggest and one of the fastest growing source of visitors to Macau last year was China, accounting for 55 percent of the total. The number of Chinese visitors grew 24 percent, according to the statistics.

Macau's figures were among the highest in the region.

China in 2006 had more visits than any other country, with 124 million international arrivals, according to the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA).

Thailand had nearly 14 million arrivals in 2006, Malaysia saw 17.5 million arrivals and Singapore had more than 9 million, PATA said. By contrast, Japan welcomed just 7.3 million visitors.