

Wheel of Fortune

A figure-eight Ferris wheel dubbed the Golden Reel connects the central towers of Studio City, one of the newest additions to Macau's Cotai Strip.



MACAU HOW CAN NOW, U ?

With casino revenues on the slide in China's gambling mecca, city officials and developers are looking to win over visitors with non-gaming attractions. Could this be the shape of Macau to come?

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY CALLAGHAN WALSH



WHAT

do you get the city that has everything? It's a question one might well ask of tiny, once sedate Macau, a former Portuguese colony and current Special Administrative Region of China that over the last decade has witnessed arguably the biggest tourism and gaming-driven building boom since 1960s Las Vegas. On a patch of reclaimed swampland dubbed the Cotai Strip, gargantuan casino developments from the industry's titans have risen in swift succession: the Venetian, the City of Dreams, the Galaxy, all boasting a cornucopia of diversions spanning water parks, shopping arcades, and concert halls. With so much on offer it's become something of a race of superlatives jostling for visitors' attention. The biggest casino in the world, the world's biggest baccarat prizes, the world's largest water-based show—all these, and more, in one place.

And the records just keep on coming. So it is that I find myself on a still-muggy fall day perched 130 meters above the streets of Cotai in a steampunk-themed cabin of the Golden Reel, the first Ferris wheel in the world to move in a full figure eight. It is only from this height that one gets a true sense of the Strip's scale—the monolithic resort complexes

that extend in all directions; a traffic-choked border crossing to China proper that is one of Macau's main tourist lifelines; the vast tracts of land that have yet to be developed but are already spoken for.

Tracing out China's luckiest number, the Golden Reel is a showpiece of the spanking-new Studio City, whose gala opening in October was attended by the likes of Robert De Niro and Leonardo DiCaprio. Touted as "Asia's Entertainment Capital" by operator Melco Crown Entertainment, the casino-resort's Art Deco-esque towers contain a host of other movie-themed attractions: a 4,000-square-meter Warner Brothers play center for the kids; a 4D Batman flight simulation over a besieged Gotham City; a magic theater; and a state-of-the-art TV studio.

Back on terra firma, I walk through the Boulevard, a retail zone chockablock with luxury brands and alternately done up to resemble a (very clean) Times Square and Beverly Hills, complete with perky hologram dance performances. Next comes the Egyptian-themed RiverScape with its vast network of outdoor pools, slides, Jacuzzis, artificial beaches, and pirate ships. For those who find wading too much of an effort, there's Zensa, a coolly minimalist spa, or Cosmos, a food court with a space-station theme. If the future's not your thing, you can grab a bite in Macau Gourmet Walk, a mock "street" lined with retro-styled shops hawking local favorites. Only

Macau Milieu
Above, from left: Taking in the views from the Golden Reel; the reception area at the newly opened St. Regis Macao. Opposite, clockwise from top left: Barbecued Iberian pork at the Ritz-Carlton Macau's Lai Heen restaurant, part of the Galaxy complex in Cotai; wine importer Tomás Pimenta at his warehouse on the Macau Peninsula; an exhibition space at Ox Warehouse; a St. Regis doorman.



Where to Stay

Now home to a Four Seasons, a Ritz-Carlton, a Banyan Tree, and seemingly every luxury hotel brand in between, Macau doesn't lack for stylish accommodation. Among the newest lodgings are the gleaming **St. Regis Macao** (853/2882-8898; starwoodhotels.com; doubles from US\$243) in Cotai, with butler-serviced rooms, a gorgeous spa, and a cocktail bar stocked with house-infused spirits and bitters; **Studio City** (853/8856-6868; studiocity-macao.com; doubles from US\$175), which aims to be an attraction in its own right; and, in the city's northern Areia Preta district, the **Crowne Plaza Macau** (853/2888-6888; crownplaza.com; doubles from US\$165). Those looking for someplace with a bit more history should check in to **Pousada de São Tiago** (853/2837-8111; saotiago.com.mo; doubles from US\$305), a 12-suite hilltop hideaway built into the remains of a 17th-century fortress.

Where to Go

Albergue 1601
8th Calçada da Igreja de São Lázaro; 853/2836-1601; albergue1601.com.
MacauSoul
31A Rua de São Paulo; 853/2836-5182; macausoul.com.
Old Taipa Tavern
21 Rua dos Negociantes, Camoes Square, Taipa; 853/2882-5221; no website.
Ox Warehouse
Cnr. of Av. Coronel Mesquita and Av. do Almirante Lacerda; 853/2853-0026; oxwarehouse.blogspot.com.

please—the dizzying array of distractions seems to be saying—don't leave.

Studio City president JD Clayton says that the complex has set out to be Macau's "most diversified entertainment resort," squarely targeting the "increasingly important" mass-market segment. Middle-class Chinese travelers are increasingly seen as Macau's bread and butter as China's economic slowdown and a crackdown on corruption and over-the-top consumption keeps the high rollers at home. Tellingly, the casino at Studio City is one of the few in town without any tables or rooms for VIPs.

Not that Macau is necessarily poised for an age of austerity. Just up the road from Studio City, Starwood Hotels & Resorts recently opened the world's largest St. Regis, an opulent 400-room property that, among a host of other indulgences, is the city's first hotel to provide 24-hour butler service for each of its guests. Part of the Sands Cotai Central complex, it's also just steps away from the world's largest Conrad and Sheraton hotels, the latter with no less than 4,001 rooms. Convention and event traffic have kept occupancy rates robust, and executives are confident about the St. Regis's future. "Macau still has more room to grow and much more potential to become a world-class tourism destination," says general manager Paul Cunningham. "These are exciting times to be in Macau, because we are now witnessing the second phase of the Cotai Strip, which will soon be able to offer a much more diversified experience."

Indeed, "diversity" has become something of a watchword in a city that many industry insiders and locals see as too casino-dependent. No one expects gambling, which in 2014 generated more than US\$40 billion in revenue and accounts for the vast majority of government income, to go away. But casino earnings have been sliding since mid-2014, and officials are increasingly pushing developers to bring in more non-gaming attractions in a bid to broaden Macau's tourist appeal. Presumably, this will be evident at the resorts opening in 2016 and beyond.

Among them are the "seven-star" Louis XIII, the Hollywood Roosevelt, the Parisian (complete with a half-size replica of the Eiffel Tower), and the Lisboa Palace (featuring a Karl Lagerfeld-designed hotel), each promising more elevated levels of grandeur and indulgence. Whether this constitutes diversity, however, is debatable. The most ambitious developments are still largely confined to the Cotai Strip, backed by large corporate interests, of similar size (huge), and targeting a similar variety of traveler (affluent). And the casinos, even if less front-and-center, are still among the main draws.

But beyond the bright lights of Cotai, which stitches together the former islands of Coloane and Taipa, alternative visions for Macau and its tourism industry are emerging. Signs of strain—that something has to change—are readily apparent. They are arguably most visible in the well-preserved but perennially teeming historic core of the Macau peninsula, especially around the skeletal remains of the 16th-century St. Paul's Church and Senado Square, where police are sometimes obliged to step in to control pedestrian traffic. The constant shortages of taxis and service staff are similarly indicative of the city's current challenges, as are the no-longer-isolated protests against the government and the casinos themselves.

Before the boom years, Macau was perhaps best known as nearby Hong Kong's sleeper cousin; a charming relic of cobbled streets and sun-drenched plazas where the afternoons could be whiled away over a few glasses of chilled *vinho verde*. Happily, in places, that's exactly what Macau still is. In Taipa Village, an enclave of genuine colonial architecture just across a thoroughfare from the invented European facades of the Venetian, the main street is crammed with neon signs and tour groups queuing up for egg tarts and sticky, candy-like beef jerky. But outside that its alleys are largely still, winding past dusty provision stores and Buddhist shrines and opening onto squares dominated by churches painted in warm pastels with white trim. After sunset, places such as the Old Taipa Tavern or the Casa de Tapas, which boasts a truly lovely roof terrace, have an intimate community feel, with resident expats and a few doughty tourists coming out to swap stories over pints of beer and plates of chorizo.

Another pocket of old Macau exists just a stone's throw from the Ruins of St. Paul's—but only after the tour buses have retreated for the day. Seven years ago, David and Jacky Higgins set out to create a venue that encapsulated everything they loved about the city they had been visiting since 1968—the elegance, the easy cosmopolitanism that comes from its polyglot heritage, a degree of Mediterranean languor. The result is MacauSoul, a wine lounge set in a restored shophouse. High ceilings, plush couches, and walls covered in old photos of bygone neighborhoods and personages (to say nothing of the effortless

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hospitality) make a stop here feel a lot like visiting a friend's house—providing that friend has impeccable taste in jazz and an encyclopedic Portuguese wine collection. As a microcosm of the city, Macau-Soul seems to have succeeded beautifully; on the evening I visit, the crowd includes a handful of Western tourists, a couple from Hong Kong, a table full of locals unwinding after a day at work, and a visiting winemaker from Lisbon.

Yet for all the vibrancy around him, David frets frequently about his adopted home. He's seen Macau change immeasurably over the past few years and expects more to come. "The Macau lifestyle is being lost very quickly. People fear that it's going to get worse; that many of the old areas will be demolished and replaced with casinos and shopping malls. The Macau people want their city back."

"The old Macau is gone," agrees his friend Tomás Pimenta, a wine importer and prominent member of the city's remaining Portuguese community. "Every seven days we have a mass for it."

The Higginses are already in the process of establishing a sister property, YasakaSoul, in Kyoto that may serve as their new base of operations. If development continues apace, "I don't know if we'd like to hang on in Macau," David tells me later that evening, gazing pensively at the now-deserted streets of the old city center. But asked what has kept him here for so long, there's no hesitation in his response. Despite having little interest in gambling, he says, "Running

a wine lounge, I've never been bored for a minute."

The Macau government is hoping visitors will feel the same way. Conscious of the casino fatigue in some quarters, it's busily promoting the city's other assets: a new design center focused on local brands; walking tours of old neighborhoods; parades that highlight Macau's mixed Sino-Portuguese heritage; flea markets and art fairs. Many of the local tourism office's latest TV ads don't feature any casinos at all.

This drive may see some of the city's less recognized attractions get more attention, like Ox Warehouse, a pillar of Macau's small but thriving art scene. The venue, which hosts around 10 exhibitions annually and operates on a commission-free basis, comprises a European-style administration building and (as its name implies) a cavernous former ox



Road Show
Above, from left: Colonial-era buildings line a tiled street in St. Lazarus Parish; the past is also present on Travessa da Paixão, a cobblestone alley leading to the Ruins of St. Paul's.

stable where the original feeding troughs are still embedded in the concrete floor. Sharing its grounds with a vehicle impound lot and situated across the street from the city's only dog-racing track, Ox Warehouse is bathed in the slightly gritty, down-at-heel atmosphere that most galleries in Hong Kong would kill for.

The ebullient curator Gigi Lee, a multimedia artist herself, says there's been a clear reassessment of Macau's priorities. "In the last few years the government and public have been more concerned about us, and about the creative industry and the arts in general. Maybe because of the casinos, they're trying to balance things out." But despite this, Ox Warehouse sees little casual tourist traffic, and "It's not easy for young people in the arts—we don't have

many alternative, independent spaces. Rents have gone up a lot. But of course," Lee smiles, "artists still exist."

From there, I make my way down Avenida do Coronel Mesquita—named after a Portuguese colonial army officer who repelled a 19th-century Chinese incursion before plunging into madness and attacking his wife and children—past gracefully decaying mansions, smoke-wreathed shrines, and a seemingly endless number of pharmacies, toward the granite-clad St. Lazarus Church, one of the city's oldest.

The surrounding area, St. Lazarus Parish, is being rightly groomed as a cultural quarter. Set amid tiled lanes and dignified old homes, its landmarks are a vivid illustration of the city's bicultural legacy:



Lazarus's nooks and crannies (and, at Albergue 1601, ingesting some excellent steamed clams and crisp white wine), I'm unsure whether to mourn or celebrate the fact that the parish is practically deserted, especially compared to the commercial crush of Cotai. I'm lured into an old furniture shop called Firma Santa by the goods on display in its window: handmade wooden chests painted a luminous eggshell-blue and adorned with birds in flight. Inside, the air is rich with the scent of wood and incense. Perhaps hoping for a sale, the elderly proprietor is quick to tell me that she doesn't get many visitors, even on weekends.

For better or worse, then, Macau will remain wedded to gaming and mega-resorts; the industry and the people it supports have come too far to turn back, and economic crisis or no, the massive population on the city's doorstep will prop up arrival numbers for years to come. And Macau is poised to become even more accessible. By the end of 2017, the isolated concrete pillars that stand forlornly in the wa-

here is St. Michael's Cemetery, where a tiny, toy-like chapel stands watch over gravestones etched with a mix of European and Chinese names—it was the city's first resting place for Chinese Catholics. Also the Lou Lim Ieoc Garden, a former retreat for a turn-of-the-last-century tycoon that bursts with delicate porcelain pagodas and birdsong; and the Vasco da Gama Garden, dominated by a weathered, century-old bust of the legendary Portuguese navigator. The entire district is a delight, every bit as rewarding as the Senado/St. Paul's area in terms of colonial architecture but with chattering clusters of schoolchildren replacing the tourist hordes.

A few eclectic shops and exhibition spaces have set up nearby, including the government-backed Macau Fashion Gallery, where local designers can mingle and display their work. But the neighborhood's clear centerpiece is the Albergue SCM, once a shelter for spinsters. It consists of a tranquil square framed by carefully restored golden-yellow buildings filled with a number of stylish tenants, including a boutique selling Portuguese jewelry, textiles, and potent fruit liqueurs, and Albergue 1601, an elegant Mediterranean restaurant. Quality European food is, admittedly, not hard to come by in Macau, but Albergue 1601 may just be unmatched in terms of atmosphere—patrons can choose to dine alfresco in the courtyard, shaded by stately camphor trees.

After a pleasant few hours spent investigating St.

ters between Hong Kong and Macau will support a bridge, one of the longest in the world, connecting the two cities and Macau's Mainland neighbor, Zhuhai. Speaking to the press at the opening of the St. Regis in Cotai, Las Vegas Sands CEO Sheldon Adelson commented that the bridge, which should put Macau within a 20-minute drive of the Hong Kong International Airport, would in effect give Macau "a second airport, one serviced by 100 airlines."

The lingering question is just what any new arrivals will want. Diversification may be the mantra *du jour* for civil servants and entertainment operators, but previous efforts to promote big ticket, non-gambling attractions have met with mixed results. In 2012, the legendary Cirque du Soleil pulled out of the Cotai Strip early due to disappointing ticket sales, while multiple high-profile nightspots, like the Tryst at Wynn Macau and the Sands Macao's Playboy Club, have opened with much fanfare only to vanish without a trace.

Regardless, if the somewhat more reflective mood that is taking hold in some quarters—and that in others, never left—slows the headlong rush of development, channels attention toward less visited neighborhoods or venues, or prompts more celebration of Macau's unique and checkered past, it will represent a victory of sorts. More than ever, it should become apparent that for Macau—and its visitors—there is more than one way to win. ●



Old Town Allure

Above left: Setting tables in the courtyard of Albergue 1601. Opposite, clockwise from top left: A 19th-century temple dedicated to the child-god Na Tcha stands beside the Ruins of St. Paul's; inside the Firma Santa furniture shop in St. Lazarus Parish; tourists crowding the steps of St. Paul's.