

# THE BRIGHT IDEA

From dazzling lights to dizzying heights, Taoist temples to Michelin stars, **DUNCAN MADDEN** discovers there's far more to Macau than the spin of a roulette wheel...



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**M**ACAU IS ONE of those places that everyone's heard of but few could point to on a map. Fantastically perched on the western side of the Pearl River Delta, facing the South China Sea to the south and east, it's a quick 40-mile hop from Hong Kong. It serves up a sumptuous melting pot of diverse cultures, historic buildings and modern attractions that makes it every bit as appealing as its neighbour.

The name Macau finds its origins back in the early 1550s when the Portuguese first arrived. They adapted and shortened the local name – A Ma Gao, in honour of A-Ma, the Goddess of Seafarers – to Macau. The city became a Special Administrative Region of China in 1999 but the unique fusion of Chinese and Portuguese heritage remains in Macau to this day. The Historic Centre of Macau is a UNESCO World Heritage site and to wander through its atmospheric, twisting maze of streets and piazzas, amid 17th century fortresses, baroque churches and ornate palaces, is to be transported back to Europe, except of course for the proliferation of Taoist temples and Chinese language signs.

Despite its unmistakable European influences, Macau is also a city of China. A year round calendar of events reflects both sides of its personality with highlights including dragon boat racing and the annual Macau International Fireworks Contest, celebrating its 25th anniversary this year. Foremost among its cultural celebrations is Chinese New Year, falling on 10 February. 2013 is the Year of the Snake and you can be sure Macau will lead the celebrations with colourful parades, fireworks and a range of exciting events.

Propping up the other end of the calendar, and making 2013 a particularly special year, November sees the 60th anniversary of the Macau Grand Prix. One of the world's most demanding road races, previous Formula 3 winners include Ayrton Senna and Michael Schumacher, cementing its status as a street circuit true driving legends wish to conquer.

The Grand Prix is typical of Macau: blending the modernity and affluence of motor racing with the history and heritage of an event spanning six decades. Like the city, it perfectly represents the harmonious best of past and present. And it's a continuing theme.

When it comes to places to stay, you're truly spoiled for choice. For the convenience and comfort of a modern five-star stay take your pick from the cream of the luxury crop – Four Seasons, Mandarin Oriental and Grand Hyatt are just some of the international hotels, many of which are home to world class spas, such as those at the MGM Macau and Banyan

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Tree. For something a more authentic, try the traditional Portuguese-style *pousadas* – boutique, unique and charming, they lend any stay a faithful insight into the city's ancient roots.

No matter how indulgent your hotel, it would be a crime to not get out and explore. Macau is a fantastic walking city where compact, buzzing streets overwhelm the senses with the sounds, smells and sights of everyday life. If the people and pace become too much, though, take a breather in one of the 25 beautiful temples, churches and fortresses listed for their cultural and historic significance.

When the abundance of culture and history inevitably takes its toll, it's time to head back to the now. The Macau Tower is 338 vertical metres of fun and adrenaline. Once you've taken in the extraordinary city and river views from the top, the quickest way down is to, well, jump – bungee jump that is, from the world's highest commercial bungee run by the legendary AJ Hackett [pictured]. For those of weaker (or rather saner) disposition who still fancy a challenge, you can try the Sky Walk ►





## THE CITY OF DREAMS IS A FITTING NAME FOR MACAU: A METROPOLIS WITH A RARE AND COLOURFUL HISTORY



► around the tower's top or take advantage of the revolving restaurant. Whatever you choose, it's a great way to get a fresh perspective on the city and the Pearl River Delta.

There are more relaxing activities on offer, of course. The nearby islands of Taipa and Coloane are quieter, the latter being the setting for the relaxing beaches of Hac Sa (Black Sand) and Cheoc Van (Bamboo Bay), two golf courses. Swing some irons, or try one of the other sporting options on land and sea, from hiking and cycling to kayaking and canoeing.

If you've got the energy after all this, Macau has a treat in store once the sun sets. As the lights flicker into life and the bars, restaurants and casinos don their evening wear, the city takes on a dizzying and electric atmosphere.

A renowned restaurant scene – from Michelin-starred restaurants to local noodle shops – offers every conceivable cuisine, with a slant on Portuguese, Chinese and in particular Macanese dishes. The latter is a spicy fusion of the former, with influences from South America, Africa, India and Malaysia thrown in that reflect the trading destinations of Portuguese explorers making their way to Macau over the centuries.

With appetites sated, you could try your luck at one of Macau's famous casinos or head to one of its fashionable bars and nightclubs. There's the Macallan Whisky Bar & Lounge,

for example, offering more than 400 of the world's finest whiskies; or the sophisticated 38 Lounge at the Altira Hotel, with an open air deck and fantastic views across Macau. Take the night further at Club Cubic, Macau's mega-club, where you'll be treated to guest international DJs and hip-hop stars aplenty.

For a real spectacular, head to the House of Dancing Water show at the aptly named City of Dreams resort. At a construction cost of \$250m, the show features high-dive acrobatics in a specially-built theatre containing five Olympic pools of water. Don't worry, they provide towels for those too close to the action!

City of Dreams is actually a fitting name for Macau itself. A metropolis with a rare and colourful history, borne from the aspirations and endeavours of visitors and natives alike, it has over the centuries rightly taken advantage of its geographical good fortune. Long since a great stopover en route to the other side of world, or even better a perfect getaway after a busy business trip to Hong Kong, it now stands as a destination in its own right: eclectic, eccentric and exhilarating enough to rival anywhere. ■

Macau International Airport flies routes to many of the region's major cities but most Brits fly to Hong Kong and take the one-hour fast ferry ride direct from the airport or downtown. For more information, please visit: [WWW.MACAUTOURISM.GOV.MO](http://WWW.MACAUTOURISM.GOV.MO)