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TAKE A CHANCE - MACAU'S A SURE BET

I HAVE fond memories of Macau pre-2003, the year foreign casinos were allowed to set up shop in the former Portuguese colony handed back to China only four years earlier. A fellow journalist and I were visiting Hong Kong, and Macau was included in the trip because it's only a one-hour ferry ride away. We stayed at the Pousada de Coloane, an historic Portuguese-style inn that excelled in making the Macnaese national dish - Minchi - a one-dish meal of minced pork, potatoes, onions and soy sauce topped with a fried egg. A Filipina chanteuse sang *Wind Beneath My Wings* in a voice so pure the Bette Midler original sounded like a karaoke night effort and warm breezes wafted over the outdoor terrace as we ate.

Over the past 15 years, Macau's megacasinos and kilometres-long stretch of five-star hotels have eclipsed such simple pleasures. The territory's 30-plus casinos pull in seven times more revenue than Las Vegas, surpassing its American rival as the world's number-one gambling destination. The gaming boom isn't as massive as it was two years ago following President Xi Jinping's crackdown on corruption. Mainland Chinese high rollers are also heading for other Asian destinations such as Vietnam, South Korea, Cambodia and the Philippines who have muscled in on the gambling "holiday" market.

There's still a lot of construction and infrastructure projects under way in Macau, but the local tourist board is again emphasising the tiny enclave's unique

European cultural heritage, food and wine scene and museums. Fortunately, the Pousada de Coloane is still in business, still gorgeous and remains one of the most popular places to stay on leading Australian websites such as booking.com.

The strategy is paying off as far as culinary tourism is concerned. In late 2017 Macau was named a UNESCO City of Gastronomy and will play host to Asia's Best Restaurants awards this year and in

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The Grand Lisboa Hotel boasts two Michelin three-star restaurants under its vaulting roof. The first is The Eight Restaurant where chef Joseph Tse oversees a contemporary take on Cantonese cuisine. Located away from the casino floor, the lavish but tasteful decor by Hong Kong-based design guru Alan Chan is based on the figure of eight - the ultimate lucky number in Chinese culture. The wine list of more than 16,000 bottles is as over the top as the vast chandelier.

More than 40 dim sum treats are up for consideration, including the cute porcupine-shaped char siu bao. The signature menu degustation features stand-out dishes such as stir-fried lobster with egg, minced pork and black bean, and the legendary A5 Kagoshima wagyu beef - the most expensive in the world - rolled in watercress. For lunch, The Eight also serves a more reasonably-priced dim sum.

Robuchon au Dome, the Grand Lisboa's other Michelin three-star restaurant, is also worth the splurge. Filling a glass-ceilinged room on the hotel's 43rd floor, the wrap-around views of Macau's skyline are as exhilarating as the French haute cuisine of the late Joel Robuchon, whose global chain boasts 32 Michelin stars. The restaurant shares the same huge cellar as The Eight.

The frankly ostentatious decor semaphores you have entered the most expensive restaurant in Macau. We opened with Le Caviar - the finest sturgeon

roe embellished with king crab and crustacean jelly - which was sensational. The other stand-outs of the Menu Prestige was caramelised frog's legs piqued with pink garlic and served on spelt risotto and Le Boeuf Kagoshima, which proved to be the most concentrated essence of beef I have ever tasted.

In fact, when it comes to wagyu in Macau Kagoshima is the benchmark and up it popped again at Aji, which opened at the MGM Hotel Cotai in early 2018. Chef Mitsuhashi Tsumura, who runs the world-famous Maido, the best restaurant in Lima, Peru, is the master of Nikkei cuisine - a fusion of Peruvian flavours with Japanese techniques. There's a ceviche and sushi counter where you can watch the chefs in action and make sure to try the carretilla ceviche - the freshest fish, chullpi maize from South America, steamed mussels and lime-based sauce. The star of the show is Kagoshima short ribs slow-cooked for 50 hours in nitsuke fish sauce.

Another ubiquitous French maestro, Alain Ducasse, is overseeing two restaurants in the newly-opened Morpheus Hotel, the flagship of the City of Dreams entertainment, shopping and casino complex. The property was one of the final works of uber-architect Zaha Hadid. French is the direction of the menu at the Alain Ducasse at Morpheus Restaurant and a modern take on Asian cuisine is the drawcard at Voyages by Alain Ducasse.

Thankfully, Macau abounds in restaurants serving traditional Macanese cuisine - a

fusion of Portuguese and Cantonese cooking. A Lorch on the Rua do Almirante Sergio is widely-recognised as the best. Located near the Barra Temple, the owner's mother is the head chef and is famous for her arroz de morisco a Portuguesa (rice with prawns), galinha Africana (spicy African chicken) and charcoal-grilled meats and seafood.

The barbecue is also pressed into service at Manuel Cozinha Portuguesa where the stewed rabbit and fried rice with squid ink are also crowd pleasers. A Petisqueira could be air-freighted to Portugal and is famous for its bacalhau (dried, salted cod) prepared five ways and fried clams. Banza, named after its wine-loving owner, who is generous with his advice is renowned for its seafood and ever-changing daily specials.

Macau's hotels and casinos are rife with bars and lounges, but if you are after drinking places with character you need to be in the know. Local ex-pats make up most of the clientele at the Old Taipa Tavern. In the shadow of the facade of the ruined St Paul's Church, Macau's most famous photo-op, you will find Macau Soul - famed for its jazz and wine selection. Cover bands from the Philippines are still an institution in Macau and some of the best can be found at the Moonwalk Bar on the territory's nightlife strip, where you can stay very late to sip cocktails or vinho verde. 🍷

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