

BY THOMAS OLWIG

# The Tao of Macau

It has the world's densest population, second highest life expectancy, longest bridge, and biggest, richest casinos. What record will Macau shatter next?

SHUTTERSTOCK

Asia's version of Las Vegas' Strip



**I**T'S 11 A.M. WHEN I WALK PAST A pack of Asian photographers and into the world's biggest casino. More than 80,000 people will ante up here today, on a man-made island that few Westerners knew existed five years ago.

"Blackjack in back," says the vest-donned pit boss at the Venetian on Macau, a water-framed region of southeast China that's an hour from Hong Kong by ferry.

Breakfast is still being served, yet it takes awhile to zigzag through the maze of baccarat tables, hordes of anxious gamblers and the incessant jangling of slot machines — 3,000 of 'em. The Venetian is Asia's largest building at more than 10 million square feet. It's the epicenter of a string of gaudy resorts and high-end shopping centers that occupy a plot of reclaimed land less than a tenth the size of Manhattan. Fifteen years ago, the ground I stand on now was swampland. I'm here to see how this "island of chance" is the envy of Vegas and Monte Carlo and, wait for it, the health-care industry.

Eventually, I locate the blackjack floor, but I face a new hurdle once there — the table minimums. The cheapest available is 300 Hong Kong dollars, or \$40 USD ... *per hand*. Not exactly "travel writer" coin. It's no wonder that *Forbes* recently named Macau the world's fourth-richest territory. I timidly take an end seat and place my chips in play.

Three hands later, I'm \$128 in the hole. I've been sitting here all of two minutes. Welcome to Macau.

"IT'S IN THEIR BLOOD." THESE WORDS come from Manuel das Neves. He's referring to the Chinese infatuation with gambling, an industry that's become the economic heartbeat of Macau, a former Portuguese outpost. "Some superstition too," Manuel adds with a grin. "They believe in the way of the dragon."

Turns out, the dragon has been good for business. So good, in fact, that in 2013 alone, casino revenues soared to \$45 billion, cementing Macau's title as the gambling capital of the planet. (By comparison, Las Vegas brought in \$6.5 billion.)

It all started in the mid-1800s when the Portuguese government legalized the gaming trade. Affluent Chinese would mix with Europeans to play Fan-Tan, a game played with buttons in local gambling parlors. But it wasn't until Portugal returned Macau to China in 1999 that a modern-day explosion became possible. In the short period since, Macau has risen to a top-five country in per-capita gross domestic product (\$91,000) and to No. 2 in the world in life expectancy (84.4 years, behind only Monaco at 89.7, according to the Central Intelligence Agency).

As Manuel puts it, "We grow ever since." Meaning, since the swamp.

**GET HERE**

Daily nonstop flights hail from LA and New York to Hong Kong. From the airport, pop over to Macau by ferry in an easy 45 minutes. Ferries run every 15 to 30 minutes and cost between \$16 and \$22. No need to book ahead of time — just be sure to book your return trip on arrival if you plan on a late departure from Macau.

**STAY HERE**

Macau has 28,000 hotel rooms (there will be 42,000 in three years), and most of them are at the Venetian (right), the seventh-largest building in the world by floor area. At the Venetian and its casino, it's go big or go home — except when it comes to room rates. It's not uncommon to find suites for as low as \$140 a night. [venetianmacao.com](http://venetianmacao.com)



The colossal casino at the Venetian is a favorite haunt for gamblers from mainland China, and the decked-out lobby (right) will hold your attention for hours.



PHOTO LEFT: ALEX MOFFORD/EPIC/GETTY IMAGES

Sure, Macau might have 11 Michelin-rated restaurants, but don't forget the street food. Stop by the original Lord Stow's Bakery in Coloane Village for Macau's sweet and savory version of the Portuguese egg tart. We dare you to have just one.



Coloane Village is the local go-to for street food.



MANFRED GOTTSCHALK / GETTY IMAGES



Macau holds adventure — like octopus and rice for lunch and standing atop the 760-foot Macau Tower. Breathe easy at the Largo do Senado Square.



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT: PHOTOCUISINE/MASTERFILE; BRUCE BLIAGE/PHOTOS.COM; ORIENTAL TOUCH/MASTERFILE

**ISLAND INDUSTRY**

**1. Philippines, coconuts**  
More than \$1 billion worth of coconuts are exported to the U.S. alone each year. The coconut palm is called the tree of life due to its variety of byproducts: coconut oil, meat, juice, butter and shell charcoal, to name a few.

**2. Shetland Islands, wool**  
For hundreds of years, Shetland sheep wool has been an economic staple in this Scottish archipelago. Known for its softness, warmth and durability, the wool is traditionally hand spun and produces the likes of tweed and Fair Isle design.

**3. Grenada, nutmeg**  
Go anywhere on this Eastern Caribbean island and see groves of nutmeg trees (hint: they look like apricots). Their unique flavor and aroma have made Grenada the second largest exporter in the world and have even landed the famous fruit seed on the national flag.

**4. French Polynesia, black pearls**  
These metallic, sometimes mirror-like gems are highly valuable because of their rarity. Known as the Tahitian pearl, they're primarily grown on farms and will cost you anywhere from \$100 to \$10,000 depending on quality.



"COME THIS WAY," SAYS JOÃO SALES, "I WANT to show you the world's cutest public toilet." It's just past noon in Taipa, the smaller of two isles that make up Macau, and it seems my guide's English has failed him.

"You see, cute, huh?" A green shack with a pink roof sits under a banyan tree. If there ever was a cute public toilet, this might be it. I nod at João, approving his observation of the john and making it clear I have no need for it right now. "In old days, all your goodies go straight to the sea," he finishes. Well ... it was cute.

The longer I'm in Macau, the more I notice its penchant for the world-record books. With 30 million annual visitors — in a space one-sixth the size of D.C. — it's considered the most densely populated place on Earth. In 2016, the world's longest bridge is scheduled to open, a structure that will connect Macau to Hong Kong. Atop the Macau Tower hangs the world's highest bungee jump. And just last night, I stayed in the world's biggest Sheraton.

The transformation might be lost on tourists with dreams of jackpots, but not on João. The cranes and smog are new phenomena. Not exactly pure landscape, but João says that times are better. More jobs. Better opportunity. Kids used to study abroad and stay abroad. "Now they come home."

He also knows some things have been lost in this massive development shift. He tries to remember the words of his father: "João, don't work so hard.' In the old days, it was so peaceful. We all knew each other. I used to sit in Senado Square, just sit. Now it's tough because tourists are everywhere."

As we walk up a hill, the top 20 floors of the Hard Rock remain in plain view. But another structure governs the scene: Our Lady of Carmel, or *Nossa Senhora do Carmo*, as the sign reads, one of the many Catholic churches and Portuguese influences in the area. Out front, two priests in uniform converse on the cobblestone. João waves.

"How much Portuguese is left in Macau?" I ask João, wondering if the casinos are swallowing up local culture.

"Tonight at dinner, I will introduce you to someone."

"What are we having?" I respond.

"Just what you said. Pork and cheese. Por-tu-guese." His smile informs me he's told the joke before.

Later that evening, I journey a few miles south to Macau's other island, Coloane, a surprisingly green and charming patch of countryside. The closest casino is back in Cotai. On Coloane, there are salted fish stores and still houses above water. The meal is traditional Portuguese seafood. Clams, lobster and octopus blanket the tables. A party of Chinese businessmen shout nearby. Antonio Peralta, the owner of the restaurant, pulls up a chair next to me.

"November 7, 1987," he says in a thick Portuguese accent, as if knowing my first question. The date of Mr. Peralta's arrival in Macau from Portugal, when a one-year work contract brought him east. We sip on red wine as he proudly talks of his Chinese wife, his son studying engineering in Portugal and his transition from the shipping business into the restaurant world.

"What about the casinos?" I ask. Mr. Peralta smiles and sets down his glass. "Casinos were good for business," he says, stating that he'll serve 30,000 more customers this year (it was 81,000 last year), many of which come directly from the hotels. "I receive reservation from all over the world. I'm very happy and grateful."

I mention the eatery's beachside location. Mr. Peralta smirks. "I prefer to go to Thailand."

TWO NIGHTS LATER I'M PACING MY HOTEL'S casino in search of gambling redemption. Again, \$300HK is the low game. Wallet out, heart rate up. This time it's baccarat, a game of chance. I push my chips toward the center.

Empty teacups spread the half-filled table. Deep breaths ensue as rows of nickel slots sing and tea carts zip by. Our dealer pulls the final card. Next to me, a toothless Chinaman moans at the outcome. I look down, praying the dragon has changed.

Rising from the green felt, my stack of chips has doubled. Win. Suddenly, it's just me and Chan Lai U, whose head is officially bobbing. Without pause, I do what so few gamblers dare to do. I pinpoint the cashier and beeline to my 12th-floor room. ■