Travel and Adventure: An island of eating in Macau

by John Blanchette

MACAU - The assignment was to accompany Philip Chiang, owner of the P.F. Chang China Bistro restaurants (155 nationally), and his executive chefs on a culinary journey through Macau in search of new menu items.

FINDING NEW FOOD - Philip Chiang, owner of the P.F. Chang China Bistro restaurants, in search of new menu items, samples the Garlic Prawns at Restaurante Porto in Macau. CNS photo by John Blanchette.

STREET EATS - Restaurants are not the only place to dine in Macau. The enticing smell of tasty and inexpensive street food wafts into the downtown air. CNS photo by John Blanchette. COLORFUL CASINOS - Recently surpassing Las Vegas in gambling revenues, Macau shines as the only complete gaming mecca in China. CNS photo by John Blanchette.

EXERCISE FANS - Macau is in a building frenzy, but old customs are still very much evident throughout. Traditional morning exercises fill the parks all over the city. CNS photo by John Blanchette. Macau was chosen because of its unique history as a Portuguese trading community off the coast of China. The oldest established Western settlement in Asia, dating back to 1557, Portuguese and Chinese cuisine fused over the centuries and created dishes found nowhere else in the world.

As I was standing in the baggage check-in line at the Los Angeles airport before my flight, I struck up a conversation with a women from Shanghai who told me that the food in Macau was no good. She was wrong. It is probably the first example of Asian-fusion cuisine in the world and not strictly Chinese, which maybe why she didn't like it, but I loved it.

In mid-March the weather was warm but dreary, without much sun, but it didn't matter so much on this trip. We were mostly indoors gorging our way through the three islands that make up the territory. We were, after all, on an important mission and threw ourselves into the research; so much so that the last meal I ate was actually painful. I was so sated that I couldn't swallow much of the food at the best dim sum restaurant in Macau, the Portas do Sol in the Hotel Lisboa.

Course after course came to the table, one better than the next, and all I could do was pass them over my tongue to savor the flavor. Swallowing was out of the question. But our heroics paid off as five new menu items were chosen by the chefs to grace P.F. Chang's menus in the fall. Miraculously, I lost weight on this trip. I had no interest in snacking, ate small breakfasts and walked constantly through the city.

Among dishes chosen were African chicken, which is an import from North Africa via the Moors. The dish traveled to Macau, where coconut milk, garlic, chilies and Asian spices flavored the braised meat, served on a bed of couscous flavored with raisins. Every restaurant's recipe is a little different. The best one and least expensive was found at the training restaurant inside Macau's Institute for Tourism Studies, IFT. Philip Chiang found it to be the most balanced and flavorful, so it will be the model for his menu offering.

From the Portuguese island of Goa off of India came samosas, which are served with Chinese dipping sauces, among the many stews originating in Portugal. The one we enjoyed most was the tamarind pork flavored with shrimp paste, and Macanese garlic salted prawns with chili also made the list.

Restaurants are not the only place to dine - there is tasty and very inexpensive street food, especially downtown, and the homemade sesame candies reminded me of the ones served in lieu of fortune cookies in my hometown of Boston.

Don't miss the market areas in the old city, especially the Red Market. The building is three stories high and built from red brick. It is also the live market where many poultry, rabbits, pigs, fish and frogs spend their last day.

In small lanes surrounding the building are inexpensive clothing stalls and incredible produce and flower stands with beautiful fruits and vegetables, all brought in from mainland China.

Chinese from neighboring Hong Kong, just a 45-minute hydrofoil ride east of Macau, say you shop in Hong Kong but buy in Macau. Chinese from the mainland city of Guangdong have access to the city over a walking bridge and you can see thousands entering and leaving at the boarder piled high with goods to take back to China.

Macau is extremely popular as the only gambling mecca in China and it recently surpassed Las Vegas in gambling revenues. But there is no joy in the casinos. They are eerily quiet and serious as the Chinese ply their luck. They are there to make money and, unfortunately, most don't.

Macau is in a huge building mode right now, reclaiming land from the sea to build the airport, office buildings, housing, hotels and new casinos. Mighty pleasure domes are being built by the South China Sea. The Venetian Macau is re-creating Venice, nearby is the new MGM Grand Macau and Steve Wynn has built Wynn Macau, a billion-dollar hotel and casino, and is planning a second.

So much land is being reclaimed from the sea that the three islands that make up Macau may one day become a peninsula. The Guia Lighthouse, built in 1865, is now perched on what seems to be the middle of the main island.

Much of the colonial architecture has survived, painted in colorful pastels in the Historic Centre, now a World Heritage Site, and preserved buildings pop up among the high-rises throughout the city. The tourist office offers a brochure for a self-guided walking tour. There are also a number of beautiful Buddhist temples on the island that are tourist destinations, especially for gamblers seeking good luck. Many green spaces and quiet parks run through the city where traditional morning exercises are done solo and in groups.

IF YOU GO

Some of the best restaurants serving authentic Macanese food include the restaurant in the Civil Servants Retirement Club (Apomac), where the tamarind pork stew was discovered, Restaurante Porto for the garlic prawns, Restaurante Litoral for the samosas, Restaurante Espaco Lisboa and the restaurant in the Wine Museum that is curiously linked with the Grand Prix Museum's exhibit of race cars dating back to 1954. The race is a major tourist event every year and is run through the streets of Macau.

For the best view of the city, ascend the 1,109-foot tower at the Convention and Entertainment Center. And if you are truly adventurous, you can walk around the outside rim of the building held in place with a harness or

jump in a controlled free-fall to the bottom of the complex.

The new Fisherman's Wharf is a world-themed park, family friendly and contains a number of restaurants.

I flew on EVA Air from Los Angeles, which stops in Taipei (14 hours) on its way to Macau (two hours). It might be wise to upgrade to the more comfortable seats in the economy deluxe section, a cross of economy and business class. The service is impeccable and there are two meals and snacks included and the ticket cost is nearly the same as economy.

I stayed at the StarWorld Hotel and Casino next to the Wynn Macau. We were right downtown in a beautiful new hotel with affordable rates and courteous service with a large Philippino staff that spoke excellent English. For other housing options, restaurant information, shopping tips, event listings, museum guidebooks, brochures and maps, contact the Macau Government Tourist Office, www.macautourism.gov.mo.

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