



Preserved and revived

The narrow streets of Taipa, a historic enclave of Portuguese colonial architecture, is home to cafes and cultural spaces that have infused the old district with fresh energy

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Macau's casino companies have spent billions of dollars on recreating European streetscapes in complexes like The Venetian and The Parisian. But the real thing is just a short walk away.

Restaurateur Gagan Sethi discovered this when he was working to open a restaurant in one of the casinos. As he wandered the narrow streets of Taipa Village, a historic enclave of Portuguese colonial architecture just beyond the looming resorts of the Cotai Strip, he thought it would be the perfect spot for a cocktail bar—something that is still rare in Macau outside five-star hotels.

"This is one of the only places in Macau where you get a true feeling of being in a Portuguese environment," he says.

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GAGAN SETHI, RESTAURATEUR

Colonial-era architecture in Rua Correia da Silva.

It inspired Sethi to think back to his own roots in India. Like Macau, the coastal province of Goa was a Portuguese colony for several centuries, and Sethi thought that Goan cuisine paired with inventive concoctions from mixologist Chetan Gagan would fit perfectly at home in Taipa.

The result is Goa Nights, which has a cocktail bar on the ground floor of a three-storey shophouse and a top-floor dining area that overlooks the village.

"Most of our customers are locals and expats living in Macau, but we have more tourists who are looking to get out of their hotels," he says. "The cultural side of tourism is growing."

Sethi is not alone in thinking Taipa Village is rife with opportunity. Over the past few years, a new generation of cafes, restaurants and cultural spaces have infused the old settlement with fresh energy. Much of it has been spearheaded by real estate fund manager Sniper Capital, which has bought and renovated a number of village properties. It also supported the creation of the Taipa Village Association, a group of business and property owners that promotes the village as a cultural destination.

"It was mainly set up like a non-profit organisation, with the objective of promoting the arts and culture area in Taipa," says Pamela Chan, who runs the association. "We have a strong influence from Cotai, so we are quite optimistic about the tourism development here. But we are trying to diversify, by combining retail and dining concepts, and trying to add artistic activities."

It is a unique opportunity. Most of Macau's historic neighbourhoods have been swamped by tourists, including the Unesco World Heritage Site that surrounds the Largo do Senado and the Ruins of St Paul's. But Taipa Village remains laid back, with an eclectic mix of attractions that seem to appeal to local residents as much as they do to tourists.

Originally a pair of islands off

the coast of Macau, Taipa was first settled by Hokkien-speaking fishermen around 900 years ago. In 1847, Portugal annexed Taipa, after three centuries of power-sharing with China, a development spurred by the new British colony of Hong Kong.

Over the next few decades, the Portuguese built a church, gardens, squares, civic halls and seaside villas. Chinese families built temples, shophouses and a fireworks factory. All of this heritage is still standing. Unlike Hong Kong, Macau's economic growth was relatively slow, which had the happy side effect of preserving many of its old buildings.

Those economic fortunes changed with the casino boom. Taipa Village is now sandwiched between two swathes of reclaimed land, one home to a high-rise residential district, the other to the Cotai Strip. Although it no longer faces the sea, the village maintains a portion of its coastline thanks to the Praia de Nossa Senhora da Esperanca, a lake that was created when the Cotai Strip was filled in.

This is the first thing most visitors to the village will glimpse as they make their way north from the casinos. If you walk along the shore of the lake, you will come across the Casas da Taipa, a collection of five colonial villas built in 1921 for Portuguese civil servants. Each has been restored. One contains exhibits on the history of Taipa and the nearby island of Coloane, another showcases traditional Portuguese costumes and a third contains antique furniture and household artefacts that shed light on colonial life in the early 20th century.

A small hill rises behind the villas, crowned by Our Lady of



From top: Fong Da Coffee, a Taiwanese cafe, in Taipa Village; one of many local street signs made from Portuguese azulejo tiles; tourists on Rua do Cunha in the heart of the village. Photos: Christopher DeWolf

Carmo Church, which was built in 1885 with pale yellow stucco walls and a typically Portuguese lack of ornamentation. From here, you have the option of descending an elegant staircase flanked by banyan trees, or a cobbled street that passes by the former Taipa town hall, which is now home to another history museum.

Whichever route you take, the village begins to reveal itself: a tightly knit blanket of pitched-roof houses painted in cheerful pastel hues of pink, teal and yellow. "It has a lot of small alleys that are closed to traffic, so you can be walking along, losing yourself in the labyrinth of the village," says artist and architect Joao O. "It's very cosy."

When he was growing up in Macau in the 1980s, O remembers Taipa Village as a quiet, traditional place, with a handful of well-known seafood restaurants, along with street hawkers selling Macau classics such as fried pork chops on fluffy Portuguese buns.

"Most of them are still there," he says, although the iconic pork chop bun stall that stood under the banyan-shaded square next to the Museum of Taipa and Coloane History was forced to close after a government crackdown on street food.

Just over a year ago, O was approached by Pamela Chan to turn an empty village house into the Taipa Village Art Space.

"I thought the idea was very exciting," he says. He decided to forgo the fast pace of a typical commercial gallery in favour of three-month exhibitions by a mix of emerging local and overseas artists.

"We have four shows each year," he says. "We understood that we should do some local Chinese artists that have never been shown. Then some Portuguese or non-Chinese. And then maybe an international artist."

The gallery is tiny—just 323 sq ft—but O says that is a positive. "The smallness of it gives us the liberty to experiment with whatever we want," he says. "Many of the artists that we show there, most of them haven't shown their work publicly before. So after they show here, some of the artists have courage to pursue their artistic career. That is the most fulfilling as a curator."

He feels the same way about the changes in the village. "The spirit is still there, but it's transformed in a contemporary way," he says.

