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.

Christopher Dellwo

Macau’s casino companies have spent billions of dollars on resurrecting European stereotypes in casinos 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 booming 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 of five-star hotels.

“Taipa is one of the only places in Macau where you get a true feeling of being in a Portuguese environment,” says Sethi.

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. Sethi thought that Goa cuisine paired with inventive concoctions from molecular chef Charan Gagan would feel perfectly at home in Taipa.

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

We have more tourists who are looking to get out of their hotels.

Gagan Sethi, restaurateur

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.

Colin-era architecture in Rua Correia da Silva.

This is the first thing most visitors to the village will notice, and it sets the stage for their experience. Upon walking the streets of the village, you will come across the Casa da Taipa, a casa civil built in 1923 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 show light on colonial life in the early 20th century.

In the first thing most visitors to the village will notice, and it sets the stage for their experience. Upon walking the streets of the village, you will come across the Casa 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 show light on colonial life in the early 20th century.

A small full rama behind the vistas, created by Our Lady of Carmo Church, which was built in 1584 with pale yellow stucco walls and a typically Portuguese lack of ornamentation. From here, you have the option of descending on an elegant staircase flanked by harem trees, or a cobbled street that passes by the former Taipa town hall, which is now home to another historic museum.

Whichever route you take, the village begins to reveal itself: a tightly knit blanket of pitched rooves painted in cheerful pastel hues of pink, teal and yellow. There’s a huge alligator that is closed to traffic, so you can be walking along, seeing yourself in the latte-far of the village.

When he was growing up in Macau in the 1990s, Cronemembers Taipa Village was a quiet residential place, with a handful of well-known seafood restaurants, along with streets hawkers selling Macanese classics such as fried pork chops on Bali Portuguese shop.

“Most of them are still there,” he says, although the iconic pork chop bun stall that stood under the banana-shaped structure 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 Paroel Chan to turn an empty village house into the Taipa Village Art Space.

“I thought the idea was very exciting,” says Chan. He decided to forge the first piece 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 understand 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 ten jo, 335 sq ft, but 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 propose their artistic career. That is the most fulfilling as 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.