



Goa and Macau: Shared Heritage, Different Destinies

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A comparison of two former Portuguese colonies reveals shared traditions, cultural links and important lessons in governance, heritage and development.

Goa and Macau share a remarkable history and heritage with a blend of Eastern and Western influences. Both were Portuguese colonies and both witnessed deep cultural transformation under Portuguese rule. Though separated geographically, they remain linked through architecture, cuisine, music, language and traditions.

Portugal invaded Goa in 1510 after defeating Adil Shah, the Sultan of Bijapur, with the help of Timmaya, also known as Timoji or Timoja. Macau was entered by the Portuguese in 1513 and later leased by the Ming Dynasty of China to Portugal in 1557. The Portuguese initially came for trade but later changed the social, cultural and urban landscape of both territories.

The Portuguese ruled Goa from 1510 till 19 December 1961, while Macau remained under Portuguese administration till 20 December 1999. Goa later became part of India whereas Macau became a Special Administrative Region of China.

Goa is often called the “Rome of the East” while Macau is known as “Little Portugal” and also the “Vegas of Asia.” Both places display similarities in architecture, churches, cuisine, music, dance, art and cultural traditions because of their common Portuguese heritage.

Old Goa was regarded as one of the greatest cities of Asia during the 16th century. Macau, though tiny in size with an area of only 33 square kilometres and a population of around 7.23 lakhs, has emerged as one of the wealthiest and most vibrant regions in Asia. Goa by comparison, has an area of 3702 square kilometres and a population of around 15 lakhs.

Macau today appears dazzling, vibrant, clean and green with beautiful gardens, flowers and well-maintained public spaces. There is virtually no garbage visible in public areas and very few signs of homelessness or begging on the streets. The administration of Macau has managed and preserved the city efficiently while simultaneously promoting tourism, heritage and economic development.

Macau had many historical ties with Goa. The traditional “Pano Bajou” costume worn by elderly aristocratic Goan ladies during earlier times and also used in Mando dances with decorative fans is believed to have origins in Macau. Chinese crockery and decorative chest boxes seen in many old Goan mansions also trace their origins to Macau.

Even the famous dessert Serra Dura, now extremely popular among Hindus and Catholics in Goa and widely served at functions by caterers and hotels, originated in Macau. Many Goans are unaware of this historical culinary connection.

Both Goa and Macau have casinos, gaming and gambling industries. Macau's casinos are land-based and are several times larger than those in Las Vegas. During the Portuguese era, Macau reportedly had only one casino, but today it is regarded as the gambling capital of the world. Visitors from many countries frequent Macau, though the majority are from mainland China.

Goa too has several offshore and onshore casinos which attract Indian tourists. However, Macau appears to utilise casino revenue more effectively for infrastructure, urban planning and economic progress. Its economy is booming and the standard of public administration is impressive.

Macau has a life expectancy of around 83 years and its administration has taken great efforts to preserve Portuguese heritage, architecture and signboards. Public information boards and road signs commonly display Portuguese, English and Chinese languages.

Most Chinese tourists visiting Macau speak only Chinese, though some younger people understand English. Elderly Portuguese-speaking residents are becoming fewer with time.

The Fundacao Oriente Foundation, which has offices in Macau, Lisbon, Goa and other former Portuguese colonies, plays a major role in preserving Portuguese culture and heritage. It sponsors conferences, scholarships and programmes in music, art, architecture, theatre, dance, science and films while also publishing books on these subjects.

Macau contains numerous sites of historical and tourist interest including the Ruins of St. Paul's, Senado Square, St. Dominic's Church, temples, museums, forts, art galleries and the Macau Tower. Many heritage structures are recognised by UNESCO.

The Venetian Macau is among the most spectacular attractions. This massive seven-star complex has around 3000 rooms, luxury retail outlets, casinos, canals with gondolas and artificial skies resembling Venice. It caters largely to wealthy international visitors.

Macau also features cable cars, miniature replicas of famous landmarks and the A-Ma Temple dedicated to the Chinese sea goddess Mazu, from whom Macau derives its name. The city also has a harbour and a small airport.

Macanese cuisine reflects strong Portuguese influence with dishes such as egg tarts, tender pork chops, minchi, African chicken, bacalhau, jerky and Serra Dura becoming famous.

Many Goans, including artists, musicians, doctors, sportsmen and cultural personalities, have visited Macau over the years. Lusophonia events have also strengthened cultural ties between Goa and Macau.

In many ways, Goa has much to learn from Macau in terms of cleanliness, heritage conservation, tourism management and utilisation of revenue for development. Goa remains a proud part of India while Macau functions as a Special Administrative Region of China. Yet the comparison between the two former Portuguese territories offers valuable lessons for the future. Human beings crossed oceans five centuries ago looking for spices and trade, then accidentally created cultural hybrids that now survive through desserts, churches and casino neon signs. History has a strange sense of humour.

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