



THE MACAU GRAND PRIX

Macau might be Hong Kong's sleepy cousin for most of the year, but that all changes when the world's maddest car race comes to town. Words: Richard Asher

Monaco may have a slightly longer race history, a royal family, more celebs hanging about and a place on the Formula 1 calendar, but you can't bungee-jump off sky-high television towers there. Nor does it have a lighthouse. It's also decidedly lacking in dancing dragons on the starting grid. Oh, and they're not brave enough to put motorcycles on the schedule...

The city circuit in Macau is nearly twice as long as Monte Carlo's and remains the most thrilling lap in the world. It takes over two minutes to get around, and every fibre of your being not to crash. It's scary enough in a Formula 3 car (the single-seaters which contest the Grand Prix itself) or a touring car (the World Touring Car Championship finale is the other headline act), while the motorcycle riders are simply dismissed as complete lunatics by everyone outside their own teams.

Unlike most street circuits, overtaking can be positively easy here. From the start-line in front of the ferry terminal (it takes ten minutes to leap off your boat from Hong Kong and into a grandstand seat) the drivers head into one of the world's longest



How to get there...

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Photos: Macau Grand Prix Committee & LAT Photographic

flat-out stretches, broken up by a couple of pedal-to-the-metal sweeps. After an eternity at full throttle, they stand on the brakes for the first real corner, just in front of the landmark Lisboa Hotel. If it's crashes you're after, this is a good place to hang out. Almost everyone gets their braking horribly wrong at least once, and the first lap can turn into a terrific mess here.

For the rest of the two-faced, 6.2-kilometre lap the drivers pretty much forget about passing anyone. But here's where the challenge really starts. The snaking series of corners that run along the hillside below the Guia Fortress (and lighthouse) are enough to scare the living daylights out of an everyday driver; in a Formula 3 car they're lethal. Drivers take on the infamous Estrada da Cacilhas with only two things on their minds: making up time and not crashing. Watching these future Formula 1 stars (Michael Schumacher won this race in his junior days) trying to thread their single-seaters through this never-ending string of blind turns is enough to leave you gasping stupidly for several minutes. And as if that self-preservation thing isn't hard enough, the youngsters also have to hope and pray there won't be a crashed car halfway around the corner. With the track as little as seven metres wide in places, there may not be room to dodge it.

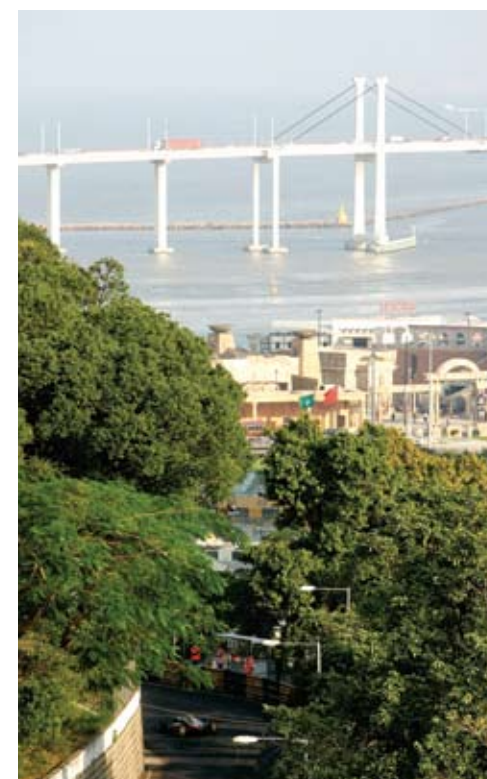
The hill road ends with one of the world's weirdest corners: Melco. This is where you start to wonder if you're in real life. It's the sharpest turn on the planet and looks as if a ten-year-old designed it. There's only one way to get around it – never mind quickly – and that involves using every inch of the road. Melco is such a trouble spot that overtaking is actually banned here. From there it's a hair-raising, high-speed, downhill run towards the seaside and the start of another lap.

The drivers tend to head to bed early these days, but it wasn't always so. One legend suggests that Ayrton Senna's Saturday night drink was drugged by a rival back in 1983 – though he won the race anyway! Nowadays it's up to the mechanics, media and visitors to paint the town red: a challenge they absolutely love. For Macau's nightlife is legendary.

Like Monaco, it's got gambling aplenty – and they're not nearly as fussy about the dress code. In fact, they're not fussy about anything in Macau. You can pretty much get anything you want here, and even South Africans will find that it doesn't cost all that much.

The massage parlours are plentiful – and likely to shock any innocent ones in search of a harmless rub-down. They tend to do a roaring trade over race weekend. And if any sprightly young Russian women approach you on street corners, be warned that it's probably not caviar they're selling...

Nonetheless, Macau is an interesting place food-wise. Although it's small, it's



got a cuisine of its own thanks mainly to the fusion of colonial Portuguese and traditional Cantonese recipes. Unsurprisingly, seafood's bigger here than in most parts of the People's Republic.

Alcohol is cheap and consumed voraciously by the racing folk after hours. The big hotels all happen to be within the compact party district around Lisboa, so driving home isn't a concern. And if one can't manage to stagger back to bed, the taxis here really do make it easy: the passenger doors fly open automatically! But although the drivers don't charge much, they're pretty much Cantonese-speaking only. Taking the hotel's address card in your pocket is always a good idea. Although, with the sound of racing engines likely to wake you up at around seven in the morning, it may not be worth sleeping at all...

The weekend's not entirely about racing, sin and iniquity though. Venture away from the glamour zone towards the old town centre and you'll find plenty of culture and history – again made unique by that Portuguese influence. And if you're really feeling brave, the border with "proper" China is just a short stroll away...

If you really have to get in a round

Although Macau's pretty tight on space and mostly made of concrete, it does boast a bit of countryside. Cross the big bridges from the mainland onto Taipa Island, and from there head to

Coloane, Macau's last outpost. There's a tiny bit of jungle here – and the territory's only golf course. The Macau Golf & Country Club is a good one though. Eighteen manicured holes on a

hill overlooking the beach are the perfect way to wind down after race weekend. There's also plenty more golf on offer in a little town just across the mouth of the Pearl River called Hong Kong.