MALDAVIAN MAGIC

By Miriam Blaker
MACAU FESTIVALS FOR 2012

For an Asian centre which thrives on dishing out a few surprises, Macau knows how to turn on a feast.

Firstly, there’s the annual Feast of the Bathing Buddha, a day in the northern spring where the images of Buddha are ceremonially cleansed and purified in temples throughout the territory.

Then there’s the Feast of the Drunken Dragon, a strange festival compared with other major Chinese Buddhist ceremonies and dates back from the Qing Dynasty, as well as the Feast of Maidens and the Feast of Hungry Ghosts.

And, of course, there’s the November staging of the Macau Food Festival which highlights the many tantalising delicacies of a centre which prides itself on a true mix of recipes from east-meets-west backgrounds. They’re among a smorgasbord of festivals to crowed what is a congested calendar for 2012.

Beginning with the spectacular Chinese New Year holidays from January 23-25, the list also includes a few annual highly charged favourites such as the June running of the Macau International Dragon Boat Races and Dragon Boat Festival, the Macau International Fireworks Display Contest (in its 24th year) throughout September and the 59th Macau Grand Prix from November 15-18.

Combine the festivals with the many tourist attractions which make up the 25 UNESCO World Heritage-listed sites and the contemporary precincts and Vegas-like shows of the Cotai Strip, reclaimed land between the Macau islands of Taipa and Coloane and there’s much to see and do on a visit.

"Whether they are of Chinese or Portuguese heritage, the people of Macau truly like to celebrate with a festival," said Helen Wong, General Manager of the Macau Government Tourist Office in Australia and New Zealand. "Prepare to feast on another year of song and dance, colourful religious parades, street markets, spectacular fireworks and plenty of sporting events," she said. "There’s no shortage of reasons to visit Macau throughout the year."

Away from the festivities, major attractions of Macau include the iconic 17th Century Ruins of St Paul’s, the popular Senado Square with its wave-like paving, the main fortress as well as the Guia Fortress, a sprinkling of refurbished and colourfully painted churches and the A-Ma Temple, which existed long before the arrival of the first Portuguese sailors 500 years ago.

There’s also a 20-metre statue of the Goddess of Kun Iam, Goddess of Mercy, as well as the much taller 338-metre high Macau Tower, a venue for Skywalks around the perimeter of an outer rim 233 metres above the ground and a series of A J Hackett bungee jumps. www.macautourism.gov.mo
The pier must be almost a kilometre long and we’re following the baggage boys who are carrying our bags. At the end of the pier we’re greeted by smiling islanders and a colourful cool drink. It’s past midnight and, after a 12 hour flight and a couple of lengthy transfers, we should be exhausted. Instead we’re exhilarated, maybe a tad disorientated, but excited to have reached our island destination.

We’re in the Maldives, one of the most pristine places on earth. Marco Polo once described this cluster of islands as “The flower of the Indies” and Joao de Barros said “Thy look like an orchard”. These two historic travellers knew a thing or two about describing this reef nation made up of 1,200 coral islands. Today only 200 of the islands are inhabited and 90 of them are exclusive tourist resorts. The islands are the flattest on earth which, with global warming and rising sea levels, could sadly see them vanish in the not-too-distant future. The threat is so real that the government is considering purchasing land in neighbouring countries in case they need to relocate its roughly 300,000 residents. Let’s hope it never comes to this as more than half a million tourists visit the Maldives each year.

By the time our bags have been carried to our room we realise we’ve arranged no change to give our smiling porters. We’d been told that tipping was officially discouraged in the Maldives, however we’re still mortified and promise to change some currency the following day.

To reach the Maldives we flew to Singapore where connecting flights depart daily to the nation’s capital of Male. From Male airport to the islands transport is either in a speed boat, a helicopter or, as we experienced, a dhoni – the traditional Maldivian fishing boat. We were only a 45 minute speed boat ride from our island but as we arrived late at night we were escorted onto a wooden dhoni, complete with our own Maldivian captain. A normally quick transfer turned into a couple of hours in the dhoni – a slow and fitting way to begin our laid-back holiday.

At Bodufinolhu, our chosen island, the lifestyle is relaxed and the setting prettier than any postcards with swaying coconut palms and pure white sand on an island that stretches just 700 metres in length. Our unit sat only metres from the waters edge of a spectacular crystal clear lagoon. Our room itself didn’t consist of much – a huge sumptuous bed, a massive bathroom and an air conditioning unit, essential as the temperature rarely fell below 29 degrees Celsius.

We’d been told that the Maldives had some of the clearest waters on earth but nothing prepared us for the brilliance and clarity of the warm water. Scores of colourful fish swam at our feet and we could almost reach out and touch them.

For the keen scuba diver instruction is available and I wish now that I’d been
brave enough to have a go. Nevertheless those less adventurous, like myself, can don mask and fins and swim a couple of metres from the beach to enjoy the underwater world. I generally like to touch the bottom of the pool so standing in the deep ocean with fins was slightly unnerving. I told myself I would stay near the shore but once in the water I became entranced in the underwater life. I swam over coral gardens of the most incredible colours, some almost fluorescent, with hundreds of different size fish nestled amongst them and before I knew it hubby had steered me to deep water underneath the pier. From calmly floating in the shallows the temperature of the water suddenly cooled and I found myself looking into an underwater drop of some 20 to 30 metres. I’m proud to say I didn’t panic, even when I came within touching distance of a huge manta ray. For scuba divers there’s the thrill of diving with turtles, manta rays, moray eels, whales and wrecks, including the shipwreck ‘The Maldive Victory’.

Back on dry land we were content to sit and laze, staring into the sky and sea, reading and doing very little. Had we wanted we could have joined in with stuff organised activities such as beach volleyball, tug-of-war between guests and staff and the highly entertaining Big Game Fishing. There’s also catamaran sailing, day and night fishing, windsurfing and scuba diving. Hubby decided he would try his hand at windsurfing and as he disappeared on the blue horizon I relaxed on the beach as minutes melted into hours and hours into days.

Mealtimes were casual and laid-back and we sometimes walked barefoot to dinner. Fresh fish and Maldivian curry dishes starred on the menu and we got to know and enjoy the gentle company of Moussaka, our waiter, who taught us amazing ways to fold napkins.
For a different perspective of the Maldives leave your beach gear behind and take a cruise to the busy capital Male. There are no beaches here and there are more mopeds than people, at least that’s how it seemed. The city is both mellow and vibrant, however you need to dress modestly in Male, especially if visiting a mosque.

Male is perhaps one of the smallest capitals in the world, with narrow streets bustling with activity, so walking is the best way to get around. It’s immaculately clean, with the tradition of street cleaning every morning, just as the sand sweepers sweep the beaches on the resort islands. Attractions worth seeing are the National Museum, the old Friday Mosque, a magnificent structure built in 1656 and housing the tombs of sultans and the Grand Mosque, the biggest mosque in the Maldives.

Prayer is important to the Maldivians. They stop to pray five times a day in the mosques and even television is interrupted during prayer time. You’ll barely notice its importance on the resort islands but the reverence is apparent when you visit Male.

Shops are open until 11pm at night so there’s plenty of time to wander the back streets and haggle with the locals for bargains. Along the “Singapore Bazaar” you’ll find everything from cosmetics to electronics and at the local market there’s a variety of produce made on the outer islands. You can soak up the exotic and colourful atmosphere of the fruit and vegetable markets open until late in the night. Undoubtedly though it’s the fish market that attracts the most people, particularly at night time when the fishermen return from their day at sea. As the sun sets and the fishermen unload their catches the market is transformed into the busiest place in the Maldives. Aside from tourism, fishing is still the backbone of this republic.

Despite the 2004 Tsunami, the Maldives remains wonderfully pristine and one of the most beautiful places I’ve visited. If you want to get away from the world, to a paradise that promises relaxation and luxury this is the place. There’s not a vestige of pollution here to mar what is often described as one of the last lost paradises on earth.
NORTHERN TERRITORY
SHORT BREAKS