

# Betting on Macau

Opening ceremonies are not merely exclusive to sporting events. Using Hong Kong connections, UK company RS Live flew to Macau to open the territory's newest casino using aerialists, lighting, a-v and LED screens. **Geny Calosi** was on the flight

**FEBRUARY 11 WAS** D-day in Macau, China. The new Grand Lisboa Casino was to open its doors to the enthusiastic gambling community and to mark the historical event, its owner, billionaire Dr Stanley Ho, wanted a show that would last in people's minds and hearts for years to come.

But Ho also had another reason to put the event on – to demonstrate to his US rivals that he is still a strong player in the Far East gambling world.

RS Live, the events production arm of Grayling UK, which has an office in Hong Kong, was commissioned to create a show that would 'out Vegas'. It was not a simple task as RS Live had only three weeks to get everything ready. An army of production staff, a-v technicians, creative designers, animators, camera crew and lighting designers gathered in Macau to pull the show, quite literally, off the ground.

The attractions included 32 Chinese dancers, a 40-piece orchestra and five acrobats that took the public's breath away with their mid-air tricks. It also had traditional lion dancers, spectacular fireworks and some of the biggest screens in the world, one of which was the casino itself.

## STRATOSPHERIC SETTING

The event was set on top of an underground car park in front of the casino, a site which was boarded up to create a 'red-carpet' space for the 800 VIP guests and members of the press. Some 20,000 members of the public also gathered around the surrounding area to watch it.

The back drop of the show was the casino. A spectacular 52-storey, 258m-high tower with the Stratosphere –



a 100m long by 50m-high oval dome made from 11,854 glass and aluminium panels – at the base of the tower. At the joints of these panels are 1,200,000 LEDs, forming one of the world's largest, permanently installed LED screens – a Daktronics built installation, with a resolution of 1664x328, which displays full motion 30fps video.

The content shown on the screen is continuous. One moment it's a fish pond, the next it's a map of the world. Then it becomes a 'Big Brother-like' eye. Written messages, in English and Chinese, are easily read from a reasonable distance and the Stratosphere can display video or animation, including the event animations, which were created using Adobe After Effects and Autodesk Maya.

Passersby can't help but take a picture of the giant egg-shaped screen. If they haven't got their cameras handy, mobile phones come into action. By the end of the month, there will probably be no mobile phone in Macau without an image of the new Grand Lisboa screen, and even the high-definition LED screen that stands in front of the casino takes second place when the Stratosphere is on.

The architects behind the casino's design are Dennis Lau & NG Chun Man (DNL). The building is shaped like a giant Lotus Flower, the official emblem of Macau, and the Stratosphere was inspired by a Faberge egg.

Dr Ho's first casino, the 37-year-old Grand Lisboa, which is just across the street from the new one, looks old and tired in comparison. Its low ceilings and '70s-style interior are like stepping into a time machine, although the two casinos are linked by a pedestrian bridge.

## CHINESE THEMINGS

RS Live chief executive Paul West says it wanted to create a spectacular show performance, but one without US cultural influences and the glitz normally associated with Las Vegas. So its approach was traditionally Chinese, with

**Above right: Huge high-definition LED screen in front of the 52-storey Grand Lisboa Casino;**  
**Below: 11m-high lotus buds were inflated in front of the Stratosphere to unveil an acrobat inside**





the themed based on the idea of The Lotus Blossoms. The special effects included 11m-high lotus buds, which were inflated in front of the public to unveil an acrobat inside, which then performed a choreographed dance routine. Chinese dancers in traditional costumes and dancing lions completed the oriental feel of the show.

Dream Engine director Steve Edgar was responsible for the creative and technical design and construction of the aerial show. He worked closely with Ian Fogden, from IF Design, who created the show's concept and the initial animation of what it would look like for RS Live. The animation was used for the presentation to win the job.

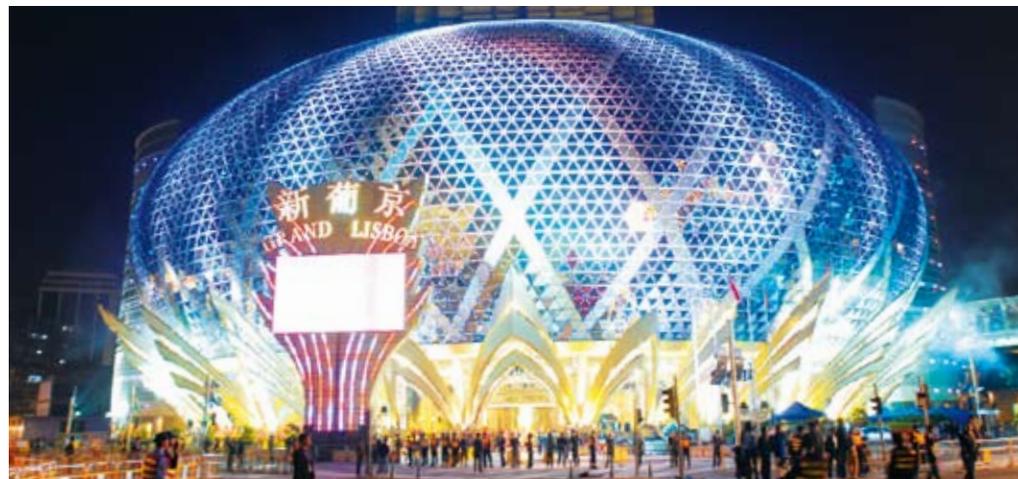
For more than a decade, Edgar's company has been wowing people around the world with shows that include helium balloons, diamonds (the transparent, plastic inflated structure used for the Lotus buds), and the Cone, which is designed to allow two acrobats suspended from the top to dance around it.

The Grand Lisboa opening used three helium balloons and two diamond structures 'to create a structure of air and light,' says Edgar. 'The aim of the show was for people to get engulfed by the aerial performance until whatever is holding the artists up becomes almost invisible.'

The helium balloons create the illusion of flying. Three people work together on each balloon – the acrobat and two manipulators who regulate the movement and height of the sphere.

A-V effects were crucial, says Edgar: 'We tried to give the show a special feel by using soundscapes, special lighting and by working together with the performer to create the illusion that someone was literally flying.'

The balloons were illuminated from the inside with LED lights while in flight, and when they were on the ground projected images danced on their surfaces. Two Sanyo



XF46 12,000 lumen projectors were used for the sphere projection and controlled via a Coolux Pandoras box media server. The box allowed the crew to put the video file in and adjust the keystone, masking, sphere projection compensation on site, which was necessary as the sphere was floating four metres off the ground.

'We are experimenting with 3D projection to produce the illusion that you can look inside the balloon', says Edgar. 'Although the images are projected onto the outer surface, they can create the impression that you are looking at the back of the balloon. For instance, you can create the illusion that the balloon is filling with water and it becomes a fish tank, with fish swimming in it. For this show, we just used corporate branded images.'

Aerialists dressed in golden suits, to look like a real-life James Bond presentation, performed a synchronised routine, two on the balloons and two inside the Lotus

**Main picture: helium balloons and two diamond structures were used to create a structure of air and light'; above: the Stratosphere – a 100m-long by 50m-high oval dome made from 11,854 glass and aluminium panels – at the base of the Casino has 1,200,000 LEDs that form one of the world's largest permanently installed LED screens**

## HISTORY AND TRADITION

**THE SHOW WAS** prepared to coincide with the Chinese New Year, which represents the start of the spring and with it, the start of a new life. This year is the year of the pig and children born this year – which started on February 18 – will have good fortune in their business, so a baby boom is expected in China.

Traditional needs had a big influence on the launch. For example, the site had to be set up in accordance to the laws of Feng Shui. Before starting the construction of it, a Reiki ceremony took place, with much incense smoke, burning of paper and prayers. As a leader of the project, RS Live's West had to cut up a cooked pig with an axe, starting from the head and finishing at the tail.

Macau, a former Portuguese colony, rejoined China in 1999, a year before Hong Kong. Up until then, Macau and the Ho family had the monopoly on gambling in China – the only other place being the horse racing at Happy Valley in Hong Kong. The Ho family, led by 85-year-old Dr Stanley Ho (pictured above), won the exclusive gambling franchise in Macau in 1961. Dr Ho then founded Sociedade de Turismo de Diversões de Macau, SARL (STDM) and he and his company have played a crucial role in the modernisation of Macau.

After the relaxation of the gaming laws in Macau, which took place at the time of the merger with China, STDM lost his monopoly and is under siege, primarily from the US and Vegas. However, the Ho family still holds three of the six licenses in Macau and has a 63 per cent market share.

Macau is now outstripping Las Vegas in revenue terms and is being billed as 'the Las Vegas of the East'. It is one of only two places in China where it is legal to gamble. Gambling is very much part of the Chinese culture and this might be one reason why business is booming in Macau. Several casinos, or 'entertainment centres' – the word casino is frowned on – such as the Wynn, Sands Macau and the MGM Mirage have opened and are full of people from Hong Kong, mainland China and the rest of the world queuing to try their luck.

Ho is fighting back. The New Grand Lisboa will be the tallest building in Macau, when its tower is finished. Unlike US rival casinos, the Grand Lisboa keeps in touch with the local tradition, with the Lotus flower as its distinctive trade mark.

But everything is not sweetness and light. Although the casinos are an important source of revenue for Macau, the local industry is suffering. A worker could earn three times more by working in a casino, putting pressure on local industries – mainly family businesses producing furniture, skillfully worked Jade pieces or special dried meats. But a new workforce is becoming available – young people who emigrated when Macau rejoined China, fearful of the communist regime, are now returning due to the fantastic job opportunities opening up.



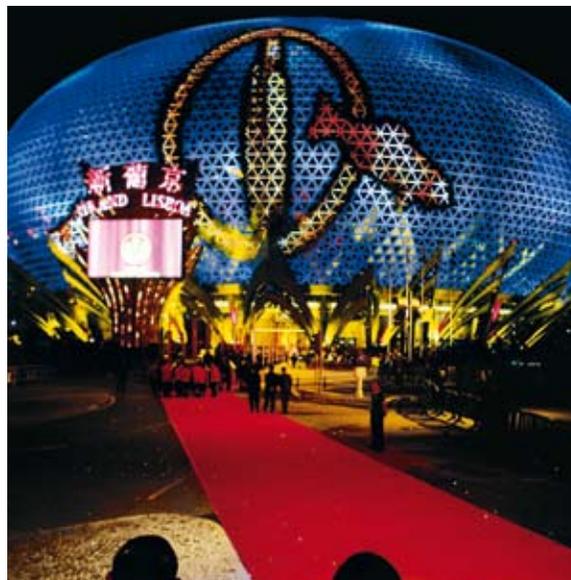
Flower's buds. A fifth acrobat spectacularly flew above everyone's heads and walked a laser-lit tightrope.

For the public standing a bit farther away, there were two Lighthouse, 19mm, outdoor LED screens, in 8x8 format, on each side of the stage. The 7.4m x 9.75m screens displayed live feeds coming from the six cameras spread at key locations across the site.

A-V IN THE r t mera l i ho a ro



Above: an acrobat walks a laser-lit tightrope; Right: 'red-carpet' space for 800 VIP guests and press



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