

# Macau casinos reopen after coronavirus shutdown but gamblers keep their distance

Thursday 20 February 2020, by [SIU Phila](#), [SUM Lok Kei](#), [WONG Natalie](#) (Date first published: 20 February 2020).

- **Low-key return marked by tight rules with punters kept apart from each other, made to wear masks**
- **Fewer than a third of tables open as casino floors appear desolate in city's staggered return to gambling**

Macau casinos quietly reopened on Thursday with the few people gambling sitting far apart under strict measures against the spread of the coronavirus.

After a 15-day mandatory shutdown, 29 establishments opened their doors again at midnight on Wednesday, with a raft of regulations covering those who wished to enter, including the compulsory wearing of masks and health declarations.

While no new Covid-19 cases have been reported since the order to close was given on February 4, when a hotel worker fell ill, the mood for gaming has not yet returned.

At the Venetian Macau, the city's largest casino, a hall housing more than 600 gaming tables and 1,700 slot machines looked desolate on Thursday morning.

At 11am, only one of the dozens of baccarat tables in the high-limit zones was occupied, with three players at the seven-seater table.

They were asked by a dealer to rub their hands with sanitiser every few rounds. Casino workers were also seen reminding onlookers not to stand or gather at the tables.

A regular gambler from Hong Kong, surnamed Tsang, said he was surprised by the hushed atmosphere.

"Previously, even in the quiet hours, there would be some noise from people who were betting. But now, I can only hear the background music. No one's here," he said.

Signs on every other games machine on the main floor told punters they were not available to play after the government required all casinos to shut down half their tables and machines to ensure a safe distance between visitors.

A slot machine player from Hong Kong, who refused to give her name, said: "The measures are not affecting me as I just concentrate on my games. I've been looking forward to its reopening for a long time."

The resumption of business at 70 per cent of Macau's casinos would be gradual, with fewer than a third of gaming tables - 1,800 - returning to operation, the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau said on Wednesday.

Casino operators reopening in phases include MGM China, Wynn Macau and Galaxy Entertainment. Ten casinos that remain shut will have to reopen within 30 days in accordance with the city's gaming laws.

The gaming regulator required visitors to wear masks, undergo body temperature checks and make health declarations via mobile phone before entering the premises.

Those who have been to Hubei, the central Chinese province where the Covid-19 outbreak originated, in the past 14 days were not allowed entry.

Many gathered in the Venetian Macau were employees of shops and restaurants preparing to reopen later in the afternoon or on Friday.

Several neighbouring hotels in Sands Cotai Central remained closed.

A sales assistant at a luxury clothing shop in the casino complex, surnamed Li, said her company arranged accommodation for her in Macau so she did not have to cross the border every day to and from her home in Zhuhai, mainland China.

"We are delighted that our employer can offer this to minimise risks of infection for ourselves and guests as well," she said.

The number of confirmed coronavirus cases in Macau stands at 10, while the figure rose to 65 in Hong Kong.

Macau has 41 casinos, which employed more than 57,000 full-time staff in 2018, according to official figures. Two of those, the Macau Palace and Greek Mythology, had closed well before the virus outbreak.

### **Natalie Wong**

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<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/article/3051571/macau-casinos-reopen-after-coronavirus-shutdown-gamblers-keep-their>

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## **Coronavirus: casinos to close in Macau for at least two weeks after hotel worker infected**

### **• Major blow for world's casino capital as Macau leader says fortnight hiatus will come into force soon**

- Galaxy Macau employee, 29, caught the virus in local transmission at Lunar New Year gathering

The closure of casinos will last for at least two weeks as part of Macau's fight against the advancing spread of the deadly coronavirus. Photo: AFP

Casinos will close for 15 days in Macau to contain the spread of the deadly coronavirus after a hotel worker was locally infected, the city's leader said on Tuesday.

In a statement on Tuesday evening, Macau said the suspension would start at midnight. Casinos, along with 18 other types of premises including bars, cinemas and massage parlours, would be forced to close by law during the period.

Other premises to close include theatres, gaming arcades, fitness centres, internet cafes, bowling centres, beauty parlours, night clubs, karaoke venues and discos.

The temporary shutdown at the world's biggest gambling hub came as Chief Executive Ho Iat-seng confirmed two more cases of the virus, bringing the city's total to 10.

*Macau casinos will close for at least two weeks after hotel worker found with coronavirus infection*

The ninth patient – a 29-year-old female hotel worker who caught the virus during a private Lunar New Year gathering in Macau – signalled the contagion was spreading within the city, Ho said in the afternoon.

He added the government had decided to shut down gambling activities for at least two weeks because the Galaxy Macau member of staff had shared shuttle buses and canteen facilities with other casino employees.

"It was a hard decision, but we must make it for the health of Macau residents," Ho said. "Macau can still withstand economic losses."

Gaming industry stocks were hit hard on the news. Melco Resorts and Wynn Macau both slid more than 3 per cent in Hong Kong trading as of 1pm local time, according to exchange data, while MGM China slumped 5.7 per cent.

Gambling revenue in Macau fell 3.4 per cent in 2019 to 292.5 billion patacas (US\$36.5 billion), according to data published by the Gaming Inspection and Coordination Bureau, following two years of gains. It slumped in December by the most in nearly four years. The industry contributes more than 80 per cent to Macau's annual tax revenue.

Macau has 41 casinos, which employed more than 57,000 full-time staff in 2018, according to official figures.

Besides the casino shutdown, Hong Kong also announced on Monday that it would close the Macau Ferry Terminal to traffic as the city escalates border controls amid pressure from the medical profession. The Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macau Bridge remains open.

Ho said his government was working on the legal documentation required for the ban, adding officials would meet representatives from the casino industry on Tuesday afternoon. "If the situation is stable after half a month, we can immediately resume [gambling activities]," Ho said.

He also appealed to Macau residents not to "cause harm" to others by going out. He said the ninth patient had caught the virus after spending several hours at the home of a person earlier confirmed as infected.

"Because of you going to a Lunar New Year gathering, the whole family, almost 20 people, needs to be quarantined for 14 days," Ho said, referring to the hotel worker. "It has a big impact on one's family."

Macau's health authorities said the patient showed no symptoms for the virus on Monday, although she had a fever and a cough on January 25.

When asked whether Macau would close all its border crossings, Ho said such a move would have a far-reaching impact, affecting the supply of essential goods to the city and the flow of its many workers who live in Zhuhai, a neighbouring city in mainland China.

To reduce the risk of transmission, Ho said civil servants had been told to work from home and that only urgent government services were available.

The 10<sup>th</sup> case in Macau involved a 57-year-old man who went to Guangzhou, China, during Lunar New Year. He developed symptoms after returning to Macau and was hospitalised.

Macau lawmaker José Pereira Coutinho agreed with the temporary ban, saying the 12 casinos he visited recently had been quieter than they were during the 2003 severe acute respiratory syndrome (Sars) outbreak.

He added that the government should ban all mainlanders from entering Macau and only allow residents in.

At present, anyone from Hubei and those who had visited the province in the past 14 days must present a medical certificate proving they did not have relevant symptoms before entering the city.

Larry So Man-yum, a current affairs commentator, said the suspension may not mean a huge additional blow to the gambling industry, which had already been hit by lower visitor numbers in light of the epidemic.

Whether you close [the casinos] or not makes little difference,” So said.

But he said the disease would hit the industry and city hard. “It will take some time to recover after the casinos reopen,” So said.

He expected the public to take the policy well as most people prioritised their health.

Chloe Chao Sao-fong, chairwoman of the New Macau Gaming Staff Rights Association, representing 500 casino workers, said the shutdown had come too late for those staff demanding the closures.

The gaming industry had made so much money over the years it could afford to offer employees paid leave for half a month, she said. Based on her observations, there were now 90 per cent fewer gamblers in Macau than before the outbreak.

Ben Lee, managing partner of the Macau-based gaming consultancy iGamix, said it made sense to suspend the casinos because many public events had already been called off.

Asked how long it would take for the Macau gaming industry to recover, he said: “Once the epidemic has subsided we would expect the VIP segment to be the first to recover, as it has always done historically.

“This will hit the casino operators hard, particularly the ones with high debt gearing.”

**Sum Lok-kei and Phila Siu**

*Additional reporting by Ryan Swift*

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**P.S.**

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