

Macau Grand Prix

GUIA CIRCUIT, NOVEMBER 2016

Words and Images: Philip Newsome

The very first Macau Grand Prix took place in 1954. Back then Macau itself was something of a backwater, a down-at-heel Portuguese Colony emerging from the horrors of the Second World War very much in the shadow of Hong Kong, its bigger, more successful neighbour 40km West across the mouth of the Pearl River Estuary. The Grand Prix was dreamed up as an excuse for those motor enthusiasts in Macau and Hong Kong to flex their racing muscles around a closed circuit made up of the enclave's highways and byways, rough and ready dusty tracks, and some stretches of tarmac. Against all the odds though the event gained traction and began to attract the attention of racers from around SE Asia who had heard about this challenging Monaco-esque circuit which was much closer to home than any of the more famous tracks in Australia, Europe and the States. By the mid-1960s the entries comprised thoroughbred race cars rather than the road going sports cars of the earlier years.

In 1967 the first Macau Motorcycle GP was held and won by Yamaha factory rider Hiroshi Hasegawa. That year the four wheel GP was won in spectacular fashion by Mauro Bianchi, grandfather of the late Jules Bianchi, in a blue Renault Alpine that earlier in the year had competed at the Le Mans 24 Hour race. Progress was so dramatic that ten years on from Bianchi's win the race was being run to Formula Pacific regulations with top flight entries such as two-time winner Riccardo Patrese and future world champions Keke Rosberg and Alan Jones.

1983 saw the introduction of Formula Three to Macau proving to be a match made in heaven. As luck would have it, that first F3 race was won by Ayrton Senna and very quickly a Macau victory became a crucially important addition to any young driver's curriculum vitae. To this day the majority of current Formula One drivers have competed in Macau and of fifteen drivers to be crowned Champions since 1983 only five had not appeared in Macau.

Today's Macau Grand Prix is very different to the gentleman racer outings of the 1950s but in many ways it has retained its essential character. Significantly, the Guia track has hardly changed since its inception. With its inland twists, turns and gradient changes contrasting with its long straights, it is difficult to improve on what many drivers cite as their favourite circuit in the world.

As the following pages show Macau's race programme is nothing if not varied. Formula Three, GTs, touring cars and of course motorcycles. For the latter, 2016 was particularly significant, the 50th running of an event which along with the Isle of Man TT races stands at the very pinnacle of road racing. Like the F3 GP, a win in Macau is something all road racers would dearly love to have in their palmarès.

Some would argue that the very act of riding high performance superbikes around the tight confines of the Guia circuit is a clear cut definition of insanity while others would maintain that the event is a glorious expression of man's unflinching desire to embrace calculated risk in the name of sporting glory. The truth is probably somewhere in between as evidenced by the words of American rider Brendon Cretu: "I treat it with the respect it deserves and always ride with a bit of reserve as mistakes can be painful...as I have unfortunately learned! Everyone thinks real road racers are crazy adrenaline junkies, which is really pretty far from the truth. Real road racing is a thinking man's sport."

Back in 1967, with the Macau Grand Prix already into its second decade, local motorcycle enthusiasts were finally successful in their efforts to have a two-wheeled competition included in the race calendar. In true Macanese fashion it seemed entirely logical to combine the two disciplines and to this day Macau remains the only event anywhere on the racing calendar where top level motorbike racing co-habits with its four wheeled cousin.

That inaugural race was dominated by Yamaha works rider, 33 year old Hiroshi Hasegawa, who guided his RD56 to victory at an average speed of just over 60 mph. These early races were nearly always dominated by Japanese riders. They won ten of the fourteen Grands Prix contested between 1967 and 1980, with Yamaha winning all but two of these.

With time, the supremacy of the Japanese riders slowly began to wane and a clear turning point came in 1981 with the appearance of Ron Haslam, the British rider who would go on to win all six of the Grands Prix he entered between 1981 and 1987. With Haslam unable to attend the 1988 event, the Texan star and future 500cc World Champion, Kevin Schwantz, made a one-off visit to Macau and ended up giving a master class on how to handle a thoroughbred racing machine around the Guia circuit. His virtuoso performance on the 500cc Suzuki was mesmerising, sweeping through corners at seemingly impossible speeds during the early laps to build an unassailable lead and then finishing off the race with a series of ridiculously long wheelies around much of the circuit including, improbably, the long drag up San Francisco hill.

English legend Carl Fogarty, four time World Superbike champion won the GP in 1992. Just as the Japanese riders had done during the late 1960s and early 70s, British riders would go on to dominate the Motorcycle Grand Prix over the next two decades. In particular Michael 'the Blade' Rutter who secured his debut win in 1998 and would eventually go on to overhaul Haslam's record, taking his eighth victory in 2012. Stuart Easton's four victories also deserve mention, in particular his 2014 victory which came three years after suffering a potentially life changing crash during the 2011 North West 200 in Northern Ireland. This was his fourth successive Macau win having missed the 2011, 12 and 13 events as a result of the 200 crash.

Last but not least, the fact that John McGuinness (*opposite*), one of the greatest road racers of all time with a record 23 Isle of Man TT wins to his name, has but one Macau victory (2001) just shows how difficult it is to win here. As with the car GP nobody comes to Macau, however successful they have been elsewhere, and can expect an easy victory. Every win has to be hard fought for.

It would certainly be foolish not to underestimate the risks posed merely by taking part and tragically the event has seen a number of fatalities down the years, most recently Luis Filipe de Sousa Carreira, who died in 2012 during the qualifying session of the 46th edition of the race. And yet the event continues to grow in stature and reputation.



The very distinctive riding style of reigning Motorcycle GP champion Peter Hickman (below and opposite) as he crests Moorish Hill during qualifying.





Martin Jessopp (*above*) exits the start/finish straight on his way to pole position. Come the race itself, he would have to give way to Bathams/SMT Racing's Michael Rutter (#2) and Peter Hickman (#1). Along with Stuart Easton (#3) the Bathams trio came into the race boasting an impressive 13 Macau GP victories between them.





The 50th running of the Macau Motorcycle Grand Prix came down to a thrilling battle between Michael Rutter (*left*) and Peter Hickman (*right*). Hickman started way down the grid in 7th place but had insisted throughout the build-up that he was confident in his raceday strategy and that he would prevail in the end. This proved to be the case as he reeled in those ahead of him, finally getting past Rutter shortly after this photo was taken.



Inaugural FIA GT World Cup winner Maro Engel and the awesome Mercedes AMG GT3.



GT Race winner Laurens Vanthoor (*left and above*) won in spectacular, if rather controversial, fashion flipping his Audi R8LMS on the way down to Lisboa Bend on only the 4th lap of the race. This caused the contest to be red-flagged with victory going to Vanthoor on the basis that he was leading at the conclusion of the previous lap.





Macau's notorious Lisboa Bend.



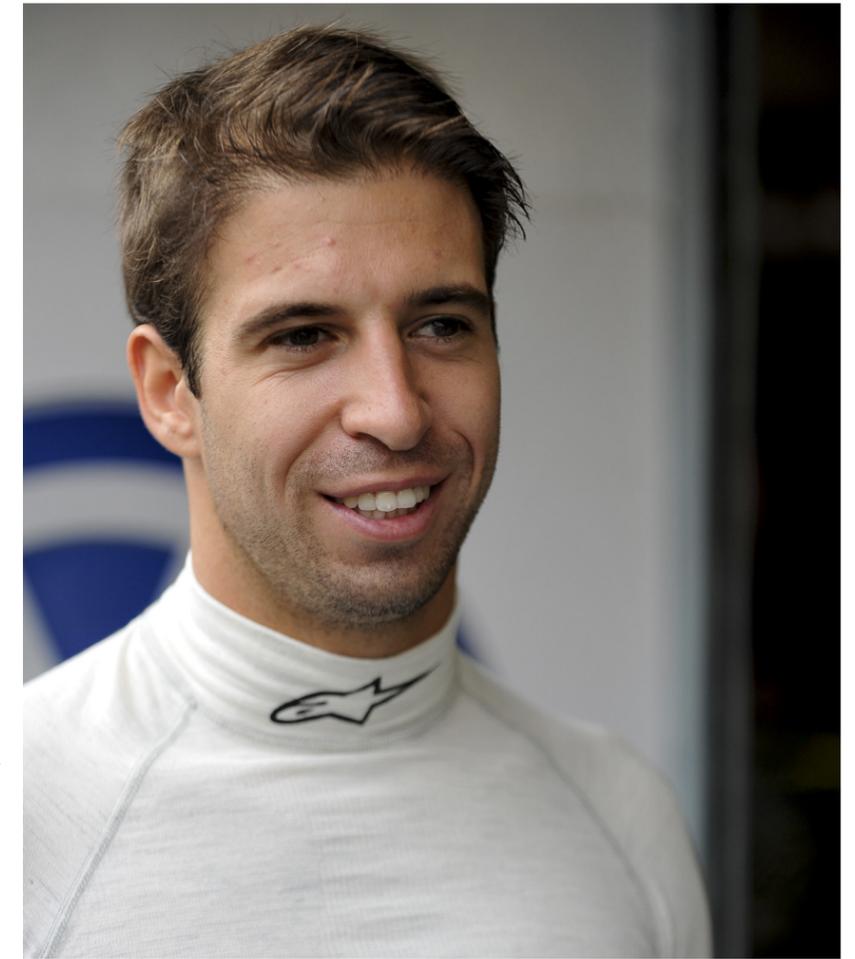


George Russell (*above and opposite*) achieved the rather rare feat of claiming pole position on his first visit to Macau. The Hitech GP driver took advantage of changing track conditions and a shortened qualifying session to take top spot from Callum Illott and António Félix Da Costa. Put under pressure right from the start Russell nevertheless finished his first Macau Grand Prix in a highly creditable 7th place.





Maximilian Günther



Portugal's António Félix Da Costa (*right and below*) was a highly popular winner of the 2016 Macau Grand Prix. From third place on the grid he quickly asserted his domination to add a second victory to his 2012 success, both achieved driving for the British team Carlin Motorsport.



Winner of the previous two Macau Grands Prix Felix Rosenqvist (*above*) endured two rather torrid qualifying sessions. Eighth place on the grid was not what the Swede's crack SJM Theodore Racing by Prema team had come to expect in recent years. They came to the event as runaway winners of the European Formula Three series but found it hard going around the Guia circuit. Rosenqvist turned things round when it mattered though and came home in a fine second place to add to his already impressive Macau record.



