

Familiarisation through hedonism: dining, exploring and communing

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[Photo; KUANG Yongfu]

ANALYSIS

In another place and another time, hedonism in all its glory was commonly exemplified by reference to (men) “wining, dining and womanising”, and in heady days of the mid-twentieth century counter-culture lent on “sex, drugs and rock-’n-roll”. The hedonic opportunities, or pleasurable experiences, that are available to citizens of the GBA – male, female, the elderly and the young alike – are fortunately grounded in basic virtues of family values, community connection, novelty and curiosity. Thankful are we that wealthier communities, commercial incentives and mobility have set the stage for the provision of a myriad of consumption choices in the GBA.

We can readily travel across borders, try different foods, experience new places and their histories and do so, not only on the occasional holiday trip but every weekend, even becoming a welcomed regular at favourite venues for a weekday lunch or dinner. This is the new GBA, where belonging and a sense of place have now extended beyond the local through travel and mobility as reflected in last week’s Times article on mobility in the GBA.

The mobility numbers over the Chinese New Year have shown an unexpected trend, that the daily commute now covers greater distances and that everyday movement is connecting the cities in the GBA. The urban rail system is showing greater usage through the GBA along economic corridors for family trips for gastronomic, cultural and entertainment experiences, and not just for travel back to homebase on high days and holidays.

Cross-border mobility and the rise of experiential travel

This easy mobility is reminiscent of behaviours of the rising middle-class families in Singapore of the 90s who would drive across the border via the causeway to Johor Bahru in Malaysia for the “best chilli crab out of town” on a Saturday evening, or “a decent bak kut teh” for Sunday brunch. The decadence of driving to another country for a single meal was made possible by the rising affluence of a generation, cultural appreciation and discernment (which comes from an openness to experience and general education), transport infrastructure and administrative systems enabling the flow of resources and capital. All the elements to encourage exploration further afield were in place as they now are in the GBA. A little bit of remaining arbitrage offering a bargain and good value is also a drawcard.

Key Takeaways

1. Mobility reshaping regional identity

Improved cross-border mobility is transforming the Greater Bay Area into a shared living and leisure space, where regular travel for dining, shopping and entertainment strengthens familiarity between cities and gradually builds a broader regional sense of belonging.

2. Food as a cultural bridge

Evolving food trends – from sustainable sourcing to fusion cuisines and elevated casual dining – are encouraging culinary exploration across the GBA, turning gastronomy into a practical driver of cross-border tourism and deeper cultural familiarity.

3. Heritage tourism reinforcing integration

Restored historical villages and cultural heritage sites across the GBA are becoming attractive destinations, blending leisure with education and helping residents connect with shared histories while reinforcing regional integration through tourism, storytelling and place-based experiences.

The search for pleasurable experiences is encouraging citizens of the GBA to travel. Shopping in Zhuhai to places such as at Sam’s Club and the expansive offerings in Shenzhen has encouraged residents of Macau and Hong Kong to flock north on weekends. Cross-border shopping accessibility has even caused property rental prices close to the border in Hong Kong to appreciate, especially since the opening of borders in 2023. This shopping foot-traffic together with the impact of on-line retail has had consequential spill-over effects on local markets, but as integration strengthens in the GBA we should start to see a leveling out of the price differentials. When arbitrage starts to disappear, the incentives to go shopping over the border may need to be replaced with other enticements. Of course, behavioural patterns and habits created by familiarity with locations a little further away from home will continue to some extent. This is where food comes in – along with cultural events and historical sites: all these

will present greater strategic value for GBA integration through what is termed spatial agglomeration of consumer amenities (from a 2025 paper from Guangzhou Academy of Social Sciences published in the ISPRS International Journal of Geo-Information).

Food culture as a driver of regional familiarity

In the food space there are general shared themes – influence from one area to the next – that are trending across the region: sustainability and local sourcing, elevated casual dining, Chinese-fusion cuisines as tasted in Hong Kong are now being incorporated into the experimental food scene in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, and finally there is an emphasis on healthy food and plant-based, whole food and functional food options.

The 2025 Michelin Guide for Hong Kong & Macau highlighted a strong shift toward locally grown produce such as shrimp paste, and fresh seafood such as lobster and grouper to champion local producers, organic produce and to reduce food miles. Environmentally conscious diners are demanding reduced waste. This reflects a wider GBA movement toward greener kitchens and transparent sourcing.

The casual dining scene is upping its quality with a modern take on cha chaan tengs in Hong Kong, the burgeoning of pasta bars and getting closer to the chef at counter seating. The provision of budget-friendly options without sacrificing quality or time has been described as the defining shift of this last year.



Incorporating cuisines from other regions as Jayson Tang is doing at JW Marriott increases the familiarity and appreciation for lesser-known cuisines and opens the way for chefs as well as diners to cross borders offering and seeking unique experiences. Once diners get a taste for something different at home, travelling to experience something novel becomes less of a hurdle.

Hong Kongers can more readily step over the border to tuck into regional specialities like dim sum and roast goose from Foshan, Teochew beef hotpot and raw marinated seafood, springy fish balls from Shunde and Hakka tofu-skin dumplings, or select a favourite pigeon restaurant like BaoBaoDian in Shiqi. Formally, the Macau government is supporting and promoting such cross-border tourism using Macau's 2026 International Cities of Gastronomy Fest as an official platform.

Food culture as a driver of regional familiarity

As for experiences, across social and mass media of recent months, there has been a discernible increase in stories and advertorials for traditional villages across the GBA. Tastefully re-developed as historical destinations these villages include Cuiheng village in Zhongshan, the childhood home of Sun Yat-sen; Zhuhai's 170-year-old Huitong Village, known primarily as the location of China's first cinema; and future developments such as the Kaiping Diaolou and Villages.

Cuiheng Village, the origin of Sun Yat-sen (founder of the Republic of China and the Kuomintang), is a site of historical significance for all of China, but particularly for the GBA. The connection has a special meaning to the people of Macau due to Dr Sun's founding of the western medicine practice in Kiang Wu Hospital in the 1890s. This village of Cuiheng was where Sun Yat-sen, in an upbringing of poverty, received his early education and was the rural window through which he first perceived the world. Within the museum grounds are a memorial exhibition area, a folk museum, a farming culture exhibition, a 1911 Revolution Memorial Park and other exhibition spaces. The maximum visitor numbers allowed is 14,020 at any one time and 70,102 per day, suggesting the sheer popularity of and pleasure taken in the historical attraction.



Award winning design: “Chongyi: A New Chapter” [Photo: Urban Practice]

Huitong Village near Beijing Normal University, north of the city of Zhuhai, was recognised in 2009 as a Guangdong Ancient Village and then in 2015 as a Guangdong Traditional Village. Founded in 1732, it is famous, not only for its cinema but for the English clock tower and as the home of the Mo family, three generations of whom were compradors of Hong Kong’s Swire Group, the largest British commercial institution of its time. Impressively appointed restaurants, bars, guesthouses, arts and crafts shops, and museum are nestled amongst renovated ancestral halls. A place to visit with a picnic or for a leisurely weekend stay and to imagine village life of times gone by.

The Guangdong Rural Tourism Association organised the Kaiping Boutique Guest house Design Competition of 2025 to reinterpret heritage sites in the UNESCO-listed Kaiping Diaolou and Villages; a reenvisioning of rural tourism. The winner of Excellence Award was Macau’s own Urban Practice founded by Nuno Soares with their project “Chongyi: A New Chapter.”

Designs were to transform existing structures for modern hospitality, to preserve the architectural integrity of the Diaolou heritage and ensure the guesthouse nestled into the rural environment. These diaolou are fortified, multi-story tower-house defence structures with western architectural elements influenced by Kaiping diaspora upon their return from South Asia, Australasia and North America.

The pleasures of life – food, family, shared experiences, tactile cultural and historical emersion. These provide effective hedonic entrées into a shared understanding and belonging across the GBA. Pleasure and engagement are winning strategies to capture hearts and minds. **By**

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