

The price is vice

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At Raffles Place station, one stop from Singapore's new Marina Bay Sands casino, there is a warning painted onto the platform, next to a thick red line. But instead of the "mind the gap" you might expect, it urges you to "mind the craps".

"Crossing the line can lead to problems in gambling. Know the line," it says, directing concerned parties to the National Council on Problem Gambling's helpline.

Such warnings, which have been posted across Singapore, are testament to the government's nervousness about the arrival of casino gambling in the straight-laced city-state.

The government hopes the two casino resorts – the downtown MBS and Resorts World on Sentosa island – will bring some much-needed buzz to Singapore, generating extra tourism dollars and broadening the base of the trade-dependent economy. But it is wary of a possible rise in related social problems such as addiction, prostitution and organised crime.

Three months after Resorts World held its soft opening and three weeks after MBS followed suit, visitor numbers and tourist spending in Singapore have both jumped sharply.

But Singaporeans have also flocked to the gaming tables despite a levy of S\$100 (€57) a day or S\$2,000 (€1,130) a year that's designed to make them think twice. That has prompted renewed concern about the social impact of the casinos.

Both casinos are keeping their figures close to their chest but the government revealed that it raked in S\$70m (€40m) in casino levies in the period up to 10 May. And a report from Bank of America-Merrill Lynch suggested that 50 to 60 per cent of the punters at Resorts World were locals.

On Tuesday, Low Thia Khiang, one of only three opposition MPs in Singapore's sedate parliament, pressed the government on the issue.

S Iswaran, trade and industry minister, said there was a "novelty factor" at play and that it was too early to say if Singaporeans' initial fascination with the casinos would become problematic.

"We should be concerned but we need to look at the right evidence," says Gillian Koh, senior research fellow at Singapore's Institute of Policy Studies. "It's problem gambling that we need to look out for, not just people gambling."

The government – and casino operators Las Vegas Sands and Genting – would be happier getting the bulk of their income from wealthy foreign visitors.

But with teething problems at both resorts and construction work still ongoing at the MBS, neither venue yet has the wow factor needed to pull in the top-drawer clientele.

That should change once both establishments are fully operational. The MBS, with its three 200m towers crowned by an expansive “SkyPark”, celebrity chef-run eateries and downtown location, should prove to be a particular draw.

“The operators are still breaking in the resorts and it takes time to ensure everything is ship shape before you can bring in the premium foreign customers,” says Koh. “It’s unsustainable for the casinos to rely on the local market alone but it will take some time to develop their overseas marketing strategies.”