

Beijing Reborn

One of the most ambitious PR events of our times, the Beijing 2008 Olympic Games is expected to draw a half-million international visitors to the nation's capital. Many will come expecting conservative, slow-moving China. They will be surprised.

Lowell Bennett and Daniel Allen



Photograph by: Lowell Bennett



Photograph by: Daniel Allen

Profound changes have swept Chinese society in recent years. The symbols of the nation's rebirth are 11 world-class Olympic venues, from the wildly inventive \$380-million National Stadium ("The Birds Nest") to the modern-art-like, translucent \$100-million National Aquatics Centre ("The Water Cube").

Also in place in time for the competitions and festivities will be thousands of new and freshly-renovated hotel rooms. Many fall comfortably into the five-star bracket, with an estimated price tag averaging US\$429 per night. Getting there and around will be made easier by Beijing Capital Airport's new runway and state-of-the-art terminal, new expressways, subway lines and enhanced city infrastructure. Thousands of multilingual volunteers, mostly recruited from local universities, will be on hand to welcome their "foreign friends."

THE ROYAL CONCUBINE HOSTESSES of Fangshan Restaurant. (top)

THE INTERIOR OF FANGSHAN has a soft glow.(bottom)



Photograph courtesy of: Anantara Spa

ANANTARA SPA



Photograph by: Lowell Bennett

OLD MEETS NEW
at a trendy Beijing cafe.

THE LIVELY LEAP

The changes that have swept Mao's China began in the late 1970s. Since then, the country has made an industrial, political and cultural leap that some residents find hard to grasp. Many of the retirees practicing tai chi, playing chess and showing off their prized birds in the city's parks still look surprised to see a passing laowai (foreigner).

But just down the street, a new-era citizen has better things to do than look at a laowai. Hailing a cab on the corner, that stylish 20-something in her favorite black Versace is on her way to meet her multinational, multilingual friends for dinner at the very French, very trendy Brasserie Flo. After wrapping up their meal with delicate desserts and espresso, they will head to cocktails and dancing among the international set at Suzie Wong's nightclub, or

to the jam-packed dance floor and open-air deck of Bar Blu. Then they might share a bottle of early-morning champagne at the ultra-stylish (and very pricey) Babyface nightclub.

THE SHAPE OF SOCIETY

China's architectural revolution has been compared to the emergence of Modernism a century ago in the West. The new look is changing the face of Beijing.

The best example may be the \$400 million National Center for the Performing Arts – a design presenting a dramatic contrast to the bureaucratic structures of the past. The remarkable Paul Andreu-conceived dome rises like a spaceship from its surrounding reflecting pool. Visitors pass through the underwater entry hall to the vast interior foyer, before branching off to one of three specialized and elegant venues for a world-class opera, theater performance or concert.

Similarly, the luxury retail and hospitality sector in many of China's major cities is rocketing forward. From the deluxe Blur Hotel created by Zhu Pei to the opulent five-star Mandarin Oriental Hotel in Rem Koolhaas's soon-to-be-completed CCTV Tower, visitors to Beijing have a growing selection of hip, high-end hotels from which to choose.

One of the most distinctive is the Kempinski Commune, operated by Kempinski Hotels.

Located by the Great Wall, about an hour outside of Beijing in the Badaling mountains, the Commune is the brainchild of China's top design duo, Pan Shiyi and Zhang Xin. Their rise to stardom reads like a Chinese fairy tale. At 14, Xin was making shoes in a Hong Kong factory, but managed to break away to study in England. Her husband grew up in poverty in rural China. Today they are perhaps China's hottest trendsetters in architecture. In 2005 the Shiyi-Xins handed over management of the Commune to Kempinski Hotels, who have since added more villas and a full range of services.

Despite the change of hands, the original villas remain favorites. The Suitcase House, designed by Hong Kong architect Gary Chang, features an in-house sauna, beds and bathrooms tucked beneath the floor, and a flat roof ideal for barbecues. The Cantilever House, by Chinese architect Antonio Ochoa, is beautifully illuminated and spacious, offering stunning views of the Great Wall and Commune valley from its rooftop terrace.

Japanese architect Kengo Kuma's six-bedroom Bamboo Wall House features an expansive bamboo-framed tearoom perched over water, ideal for private sunbathing.

"We have a very unique blend of contemporary architecture and art in a natural location by a historical landmark," says General Manager Yves Wencker. "Our concept is of a shared landscape. The luxury is the space, eight square kilometers of private land and a private path to an unrestored part of the Great Wall. It is a true haven of peace and serenity in a fast-paced country, away from the rush of the megalopolis."

One of the Kempinski Commune's more popular facilities is the tri-level Anantara Spa, offering guests a sanctuary of privacy and tranquility. Imbued with the aroma of sandalwood and lavender, the spa's luxurious suites offer stunning views over the forested slopes and snaking contours of the Great Wall. The spa offers a wide range of massage and beauty treatments, as well as tai chi, yoga, personal fitness trainers, hiking, biking, fishing, golf and skiing.

A REGAL CUISINE

Food is practically a religion in China, and in Beijing the devoted practice their faith at tens of thousands of temples – the city's wildly varying restaurants. For that globally-recognized signature dish, Peking Duck, most



Photograph by: Daniel Allen

BUZZING BAR SCENE, SUZIE WONG'S

Chinese concierges will direct you to the Qianjude Restaurant, founded in 1864. To experience more exotic Qing Dynasty fare, however, you should dine where the Empress dined.

The woman who would become known as the Empress Dowager Cixi (1835-1908) was born to a middle-class family. In 1851 she was chosen from among many applicants to become a fifth-ranked concubine to Emperor Xianfeng. Eventually rising through the ranks and giving birth to Zaichun, who later became Emperor



Photographs by: Daniel Allen



BAMBOO WALL HOUSE
at Kempinski Commune.
(left)

SUITCASE HOUSE
at Kempinski Commune.
(right)



Photograph by: Daniel Allen

BABYFACE INTERIOR

Tongzhi, she skillfully out-manuevered many rivals to rule China for a half-century. Cixi was beautiful, charming, intelligent, ruthless ... and a big eater. Hundreds of exotic dishes were created especially for her. Many of those recipes remain on the menu at the place she would visit after strolling and boating in her royal gardens, the FangShan Restaurant.

FangShan is located on Qionghua Island, in the lake at the center of the expansive garden complex now known as Beihai Park. Antique chandeliers highlight the plush imperial-style décor; the attractive hostesses dress are garbed as royal concubines. The extensive menu includes dishes such as Camel's Paw in Green Chinese Scallion Sauce, Camel Stew, and Stewed Prawns with Sea Cucumber and Sharkskin. (For the not-so-adventurous, less exotic cuisine is available.)

THE NEW FACE OF NIGHTLIFE

After dinner, hop a cab and hit the town. Urban nightlife in China has developed at a breakneck speed over the last decade, as young and affluent Chinese search for new ways to have fun and exhibit their wealth. The hottest venues draw as many locals as expats,

and none would look out of place in New York, Tokyo or London.

The popular Babyface nightclub chain recently opened its second Beijing branch. Its striking interior features bright tiles, glowing neon, wall mirrors, and sparkling ceiling beads. Foreign DJs regularly spin hip hop and house, and intimate private rooms provide an alternative to the tables fronting the dance floor. There's an extensive cocktail menu. The local favorite? A bottle of Chivas with a side of ice and green tea.

Suzie Wong's nightclub is another potent place to see and be seen. As at Babyface, international DJs are a regular draw here. A recent dance floor expansion now offers locals and laowai more room to move and mingle. The rooftop terrace is the perfect place for a cocktail after an afternoon at the Olympics. There are also VIP booths for those want a more intimate spot to chat about new world records in a nearly-new Beijing. ■

Dates	August 8-24
Official Theme	One World, One Dream
Sports	28, including swimming, diving, gymnastics, equestrian, track and field, and table tennis
Events	302
New events	Nine, including marathon swimming and BMX bicycle racing
Venues	Beijing, Qingdao, Shanghai, Qinhuangdao, Hong Kong, Tianjin, Shenyang

Tickets Hotel rooms and event tickets are in hot demand. Start by calling your travel agent. Also, check Olympic sales agents such as www.sportstraveler.net or www.sinohotel.com. Be careful! Unscrupulous "agents" have been selling fake tickets.

Indonesia will send at least 24 athletes to the Olympics to compete in events including weightlifting, archery, badminton, swimming and sailing.

Related Events The Paralympic Games (September 6-17) showcases some of the world's premiere disabled athletes.

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