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Post-Olympic China: what does the future hold?

Thursday, January 15, 2009

The Olympics thrust China into the spotlight, but did it boost sales from the UK? China expert Peter Ellegard assesses its impact, and the potential for future sales



A year ago, China was in buoyant mood as it prepared to welcome the world for what promised to be the most lavish and spectacular Olympic Games ever staged.

International tourist arrivals were soaring – the UK alone surged 10% in 2007 to reach 600,000, with a further 8% rise forecast for 2008 – and the Games were expected to bring in an extra half million visitors to Beijing.

The Olympics was indeed a spectacular success, showcasing China's capital and other host cities to a record global TV audience of 4.7 billion during the three weeks of competition last August. Yet the promised tourism bonanza never happened.

China National Tourism Administration statistics show the number of international visitors fell by more than 20% during August, while the 16.5 million foreigners who visited between January and August represented a 2% drop.

The downturn continued into traditionally-popular September, with foreign arrivals showing another 15% decrease.

That seemed to back a report last year by the European Tour Operators Association, which claimed that the Olympics had no tourism benefit and actually dissuaded visitors going to host nations, citing falling visitor numbers to Australia following the 2000 Sydney Olympics and Greece failing to keep pace with leading competitors after Athens 2004.

Public perception about overcrowding and overpricing blighted host destinations, said ETOA executive director Tom Jenkins.

In China's case, the quadrupling of rates by Beijing hotels before and during the Games hit bookings last year and was denounced as a rip-off by operators. There were other factors, too.

The Tibet riots in early 2008 sparked anti-Chinese sentiment around the world, while parts of Sichuan were devastated by an earthquake in May. The global financial crisis also hit inbound tourism demand.

So how will tourism to China from the UK hold up in 2009? Things are looking bullish for the Year of the Ox, it would seem.

Future events keeping it in the spotlight include the total eclipse of the sun across Shanghai, on July 22, which is featured in tours by several operators, and the Expo 2010 extravaganza (in Shanghai from May to October, 2010).

More destinations will start making their mark as travellers explore beyond the traditional triangle of Beijing, Shanghai and Xi'an. Tour operators are positive about China's prospects.

Premier Holidays' head of Faraway product, David Carlaw, said: "Before the Olympics there was some negativity and people were a bit apprehensive about going. But the Olympics have made a big impression. People learned a lot about

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China from TV coverage of the Games.. "The country is being seen in a much more positive light. We expect a surge in bookings over the next couple of months."

Kuoni product manager Darren Lancaster conceded sales to China in 2008 were down on 2007 levels and said the recession meant it faced similar challenges to other destinations in 2009.

"Fortunately China is often seen as a 'must see' destination and we are encouraged by the booking patterns for next year," he added. "In the future, independent travel will overtake escorted touring sales, as clients look for a more personal holiday experience that can be taken at their own pace.

The Olympics provided the springboard for the improvement in China's leisure infrastructure which will facilitate this trend."

Wendy Wu Tours managing director Laurence Hicks believes the Beijing Olympics had a positive impact for China and will offer a long-lasting benefit to the country.

The operator claims 2008 sales were almost double those of 2007, helped by the Olympics. "The escorted tours market is more robust than others, as our customers are traditionally retired, inflation-proof, have money saved in the bank and are looking to fulfil their list of lifetime dreams."

Travel 2 product executive Alex Loizou said: "The Olympics showcased Beijing as a vibrant city with much to offer. Since the Olympics. We have seen an increase to bookings in China and forward bookings suggest that this is set to continue through 2009."

China in 2009: new tours to book

Premier Holidays: Four new coach tours launched with Wendy Wu Tours, taking in the solar eclipse, plus its first Yangtze cruise.
www.trade.premierholidays.co.uk

Kuoni: A new 15-night China in Style tour covers Beijing, Xi'an, Chengdu, Yangtze, Shanghai and Guilin with five-star accommodation and private excursions, leading in at £3,299 per person. China has also been included in its World Class portfolio, including a private eight-night Ultimate China tour with extensions to Sanya, Hong Kong and Yangtze cruises.
www.kuoni.co.uk

Wendy Wu Tours: Two new tours plus an additional departure of an existing itinerary to its Eclipse Tours programme, giving four eclipse-watching tours in July 2009.
www.wendywutours.co.uk

Hayes & Jarvis: There are several more independent tours, plus two new Exclusive Collection cruise and rail add-on options offering a four-night Yangtze cruise (from £569) and five days on the luxury Tangula train from Beijing to Lijiang in Yunnan province (from £2,579).
www.hayesandjarvis.co.uk/agents

China hotspots

Beijing: Interest in China's capital was heightened by the Olympics, and with many new hotels visitors wanting to see it for themselves.

Shanghai: The 21st-century's longest solar eclipse in July is selling strongly for the city, which will host Expo 2010.

Xi'an: China's Terracotta Army remains a huge lure, boosted by the British Museum exhibition in 2008.

Chengdu and Jiuzhaigou, Sichuan: Provincial capital Chengdu, home to one of China's main panda sanctuaries, was unscathed by the tragic earthquake, as was Unesco-listed Jiuzhaigou, otherwise known as Nine Village Valley.

Yangtze River cruises: With the Three Gorges Dam project all but complete and water levels in the gorges nearing their full height as a result, demand for cruises is growing again.

Guilin: The fabled, beautiful karst peaks lining the Li River are drawing ever more UK visitors.

Sanya: Forget the failed Airtours charters – new high-class hotels will help make China's tropical beach a popular add-on to Hong Kong or a China tour.

Lijiang, Yunnan province: Minority cultures, stunning mountain scenery and its well-preserved historic centre will be powerful draws.

Tibet: A slow recovery from last year's unrest will be helped by the introduction of a new luxury train from Beijing, the Tangula.

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