

# China opens Olympic facilities

By Mark Sissons

Visitors heading to Beijing can now add another attraction to their 'must-see' list of sites that includes the Great Wall, the Forbidden City, the Temple of Heaven and Tiananmen Square.

Fresh from flawlessly hosting the most spectacular Olympic Games ever mounted, China's State General Administration of Sports (SGAS) recently opened the major Olympic venues to the public. Now, visitors can explore the gargantuan 'Birds Nest' National Stadium that hosted the Games' opening and closing ceremonies and the incandescent Beijing National Aquatics Center, nicknamed the Water Cube, where American Michael Phelps swam into the record books.

SGAS officials estimate that more than 90,000 visitors a day will soon be flocking to the site of China's global coming-out party. On the morning I visited the impressive complex during a recent media trip hosted by the China National Tourist Office, tour buses were already lined up ten deep discharging domestic tour groups onto the enormous Olympic Park grounds. My colleagues and I appeared to be the only foreigners amid a sea of Chinese eagerly descending on the epicentre of their nation's latest architectural marvels.

## Heaven and Earth

In China, a square shape traditionally represents Earth while the oval of the bird's nest embodies heaven. Made from 36km of criss-crossing steel beams, the 100,000-seat Birds Nest is a masterpiece of environmentally friendly design. Resembling giant blue bubbles, the square Water Cube's synthetic membrane's state-of-the-art technology make it as energy efficient as it is visually unique. Up close, these futuristic interpretations of millennia-old beliefs are even more mesmerizing than they appeared on TV during the Games.

## Lessons learned

The decision to promote its Olympic facilities reflects China's determination to avoid the post-Olympics venue usage problems of former host countries. Montreal, for example, with its scandal-ridden Olympic Stadium cost overruns spent decades explaining the cost and under-usage of its stadium; and Athens, which frantically rushed to complete its venues in time for the 2004 Summer Games, let them rapidly fall into disrepair after the Olympic flame was doused.

"When bidding for the selection of the Water Cube, 75% of the consideration went into its operation after the Games," said Li Ai Qing, chairman and party secretary of Beijing State-Owned Asset Management Co.

As early as 2006, there was already a comprehensive post-Olympics plan in place for the Water Cube that will transform it into a public waterports recreation centre, which will also include a 6000-metre water park. Construction on that facility is set to begin soon.



The 100,000-seat Birds Nest arena became an icon for the 2008 Summer Olympics in Beijing.

"The Water Cube will certainly be open to the community at an affordable price", said Li, adding that it will also continue to function as the primary training facility for China's national team, as well as host national and international competitions.



*The Water Cube's exterior resembles water bubbles and is both environmentally friendly and unique in design*

## Padding the nest

Plans for the Birds Nest are even more ambitious. The Beijing government recently transferred control of it to a private consortium intent on transforming the enormous complex into a vibrant cultural and sports centre. According to Beijing United Stadium Limited Co. general manager Li Jian Yi, his consortium plans to invest more than \$35 million into what he describes as a one-stop business, shopping, dining, cultural and sports complex.

"We plan to create exhibition facilities featuring uniquely Chinese characteristics," he adds, "including large-scale 'Beijing-style' performances designed to showcase to the world the culture of this beautiful city."

With their gleaming mix of post-modern design and traditional inspiration, Beijing's newly opened Olympic facilities will likely inspire even more visitors to experience a city already renowned for its fabulous historical treasures.

And if my recent visit is any indication, the popularity of these remarkable Olympic venues will turn out to be as good as gold for Beijing's tourism industry.

## Getting There

Air China ([www.airchina](http://www.airchina.com)) offers daily direct flights from Vancouver to Beijing. Visiting the Bird's Nest costs \$8.50 while entry to the Water Cube is just 5.25. There are also preferential prices for students, the elderly and the disabled. For more details visit the China National Tourist Office ([www.tourismchina-ca.com](http://www.tourismchina-ca.com)) and Visit Beijing ([www.visitbeijing.com.cn](http://www.visitbeijing.com.cn)).

**The Pudong Shangri-La** in Shanghai has created several packages offering a range of experiences geared to shoppers or spa aficionados. The shopping package includes the services of a shopping concierge for three hours. A two-night minimum stay is required for the package, which is valid through February 28, 2009 and subject to a 15% service charge. The spa package offers a range of therapies based on the ancient healing traditions, philosophies and rituals of China and the Himalayas.