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TODAY in Beijing

Overcoming the Olympic hurdles of traveling to China

The secrets and shortcuts to successfully attending this summer's games

By Peter Greenberg
 TODAYShow.com contributor
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It's less than two months before the Olympics begin in Beijing, and more than 500,000 visitors are expected to arrive during the games. If you want to be one of them, you've probably already heard how expensive it may be to get there, how costly it will be to be there and how impossible it may be to get tickets to the events.

But if you can think a little outside the box and plan carefully, you can easily get to China, stay there, and attend some of your favorite Olympic events.

Let's start with the task of getting there:

Getting there
 Try pricing an airline ticket from the U.S. to Beijing and be prepared for serious sticker shock. A few airline tickets are available — coach — for over \$2,000 from New York to Beijing. On Continental Airlines, a round-trip coach seat on their nonstop flight from Newark (listed on kayak.com) is priced at more than \$10,000!

But there are a number of affordable alternatives, and the fare savings are substantial. Even better, many of them have some surprise benefits.

One option is to buy an RTW ticket. RTW stands for around the world — and what you'll be doing is just that — with Beijing as a stop along the way. This is the one ticket where more costs... less. Some RTW choices with sample itineraries:

Airtreks – RTW ticket: New York - Kiev - Beijing - Hong Kong - New York, \$1,249-\$1,625 (high season) plus taxes of \$450; Los Angeles - Beijing - Delhi - Istanbul - London - New York \$1,699-\$2,225 plus taxes of \$480

There are many flight options with RTW tickets and they are offered in conjunction with two or more airlines with dozens and dozens of flight/destination combinations. You can fly in any direction. You just need to stay flying in the same direction throughout your trip — no doubling back.


The All Asia Pass on Cathay Pacific: The All Asia pass includes coach-class air from Los Angeles, San Francisco or New York to Hong Kong plus 21 consecutive days of travel to up to four other "basic" Asian cities such as Beijing, Bali, Bangkok, Singapore and Tokyo. The 2008 All Asia Pass starts at \$1,099, but for travel through August 17, 2008, it requires a summer surcharge of \$500. Still, a great deal.

Air Tahiti: Air Tahiti recently launched its RTW ticket, starting at \$3,600 for coach (\$6,450 business and \$10,050 first class), plus taxes and fees.

(Note that the business-class around-the-world fare is less than Air Tahiti Nui's regular business-class round-trip price for L.A.-Sydney!)

- You must fly in one direction, but you can opt to start either in Los Angeles or New York.

Video



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How to get to Beijing
 June 10: TODAY travel editor Peter Greenberg gives tips on getting to Beijing for the Summer Olympics.

Today show

Slide show



Best of the Olympics
 Athletes made big splashes in their triumphant wins and disappointing defeats.

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Olympics end with a bang
 Fabulous fireworks, pretty performers and more at the Closing Ceremony.

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Olympic portraits
 From swimmer Michael Phelps to gymnast Shawn Johnson, athletes of the Beijing Games.

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- The biggest catch is that they fly on Air China and Emirates, neither of which goes between China and Japan, so you have to make your own way between those two countries.

- A sample itinerary can be L.A.-Tahiti-Tokyo, then get yourself to Beijing-Dubai-L.A.; N.Y.-Dubai-Beijing-Shanghai, then get yourself to Tokyo-Tahiti-N.Y.

Or, you can go to local Chinese travel agents in the U.S.

Fly China: Chinese-owned travel agency based in Boca Raton, Florida. Only arranges airfare, not hotels.

- Currently has tickets to PEK (Beijing) from LAX/SFO between \$1,600-\$2,500 and from JFK \$1,800-\$3,000.
- Flights to Hong Kong are about \$1,400 from LAX/SFO, \$1,600 from JFK.
- Flights to Shanghai from LAX/SFO will be about \$1,600-\$2,500 and from JFK \$1,800-\$3,000.

Where to stay in Beijing

Marriott International: Marriott will have five new properties in Beijing: The JW Marriott and Ritz Carlton already opened in October, but those are close to fully booked at this point.

The three remaining properties have close to 1,000 rooms still available: Courtyard by Marriott Beijing Northeast, Renaissance Beijing Capital and Beijing Marriott Hotel City Wall. They are accepting bookings at this point and will be open by the Olympics.

Intercontinental: Holiday Inn Express begins at \$360 and Holiday Inn begins at \$344, and all of the hotels below have rooms available.

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- Holiday Inn, Central Plaza Beijing starts at \$519
- Holiday Inn, Temple of Heaven starts at \$346
- Holiday Inn, Chang an West starts at \$344
- Holiday Inn Express, Shangdi East Road starts at \$360

Opposite House, Beijing: This stylish new property will open in July. Designed by avant-garde Japanese architect Kengo Kuma and Shanghai-based designers Lyndon Neri and Rossana Hu, this is the first in a series of the new Swire Hotels. The starting rate is approximately \$1,112 per person per night, and includes breakfast and taxes.

Wyndham Hotel Group: This company has four Super8 properties in Beijing, all with availability:

- Ao Yun Cun, Super8 Hotel starts at \$210 a night
- Shang Di, Super8 Hotel starts at \$215 a night
- He Ping Li, Super8 Hotel starts at \$187 a night
- Niao Chao, Super8 Hotel starts at \$148 a night (this is located in the Chaoyang District, also home to Olympic Park).

These are just some examples of availability and price.

But there's a more important and effective way to approach getting a hotel room this close in to the Olympic events. Almost every hotel reservations agent will tell you their hotel is either fully booked or sold out in Beijing. This is not necessarily true. It all gets down to a definition of terms. There's a huge difference between a *blocked* room and a *booked* room. And more often than not, when a hotel tells you it's sold out, they are really talking about rooms that are *blocked* — inventory that is controlled by large corporations, sponsors or Olympic organizing committees.

And how can you benefit from the knowledge of this blocked versus booked distinction? As we get closer to the opening events, each of the entities controlling those room blocks will reassess their room needs and then — *voilà!* — one by one, rooms begin to be *unblocked* and come back into the available pool, often at much lower prices. A key strategy for getting rooms is calling hotels and finding out who controls the room blocks, and then contacting those companies/organizations directly. Get on their radar and let them know you're interested in getting one of those rooms when they become available.

You can also opt for a package tour that includes airfare:

Package tours

Cartan Tours: A California-based tour company that offers Olympics tour packages, including airfare from San Francisco, a full-day sightseeing tour and breakfast, ranging from 4-20 days, with prices varying based on the type of accommodation. Note that packages do not include tickets to the games.

- Only features hotels that are walking distance of the metro.
- You can also purchase packages for alternate venues such as Hong Kong (for equestrian events) and extensions for travel in China before or after your Olympics experience.
- "Deluxe" Beijing package: eight days at the Marco Polo Parkside Hotel, \$9,945.
- "Standard" Beijing package: eight days at the Courtyard by Marriott \$5,895; 10 days is \$8,195.
- "Tourist" Beijing package: eight days at the Fuhao Hotel is \$6,395; nine days is \$9,185.
- Hong Kong package: (low) six days at the Harbour Plaza Metropolis \$2,395; (high) 15 days at the Peninsula with a grand Deluxe Harbour View room, \$9,495.

Olympic tickets

Assuming you have your airline ticket and your hotel room, you don't want to be stuck in that hotel room watching the Olympics on television. Here's how you can still get tickets at this late date:

CoSport.com, 877-457-4647: This is the official ticket site for the Beijing Olympics. The third phase of tickets has already closed, but you can still purchase hotel/event packages until supplies run out.

- Packages range from \$4,000 to \$20,000, depending on the property and event. All Hospitality Packages include accommodations, event tickets, breakfast, airport transfers and CoSport Hospitality passes (access to the hospitality lounge for drinks and snacks). All-inclusive packages also include accredited ground transportation, additional meals, daily excursions, and bilingual hosts.
- You can order up to 5 packages per person.
- Sample package August 10-13: Men's and Women's Tennis, Men's Gymnastic Team Finals, and Men's and Women's Swimming Heats, plus three nights at the Minzu Hotel (renovated last year and has solid reviews); \$4,778.50 (per person, double occupancy).
- Sample Package: Women's Semifinals Diving, Women's Football Finals, Men's Semifinal Volleyball, Men's Table Tennis Finals, Men's Water Polo Finals, Closing Ceremony, plus five nights at the Novotel Peace (half mile from Tiananmen Square), \$9,581 (per person, double occupancy).

Ticketliquidator.com: This is a broker service that aggregates a variety of ticket sellers and resellers. Those sellers are held to a standard that requires them to show proof of purchase (no fake tickets).

- Tickets are still available for a variety of sporting events and hotel rooms (or a combo package). You can view seating charts to see where the seats are located.
- Sample tickets: Swimming, \$275-\$679; Women's gymnastics, \$141-\$190; Fencing ranges from \$78-\$156.

RazorGator.com, 800-542-4466: Also a ticket broker that aggregates other vendors.

- Sample tickets: Boxing, \$55-\$273; Tennis, \$87-\$273; Gymnastics (very limited!), \$205

Another way to go: Skip Beijing altogether and attend some Olympic events in other venues:

Alternate events

Hong Kong: Equestrian events at the Shatin Olympic Equestrian Venue and the Beas River Olympic Equestrian Venue, August 9-19; Equestrian tickets start at about \$73.

Qingdao: Sailing, August 9-21 at the Qingdao Olympic Sailing Center, August 8, 2008, to August 24; Sailing tickets start at about \$170.

Quinhuangdao, Shanghai, Shenyang and Tianjin: Football

Please note that flights to Qingdao will probably cost you more, as you have to fly through Beijing, Shanghai or Hong Kong. However, flights to Hong Kong will be cheaper than flying to Beijing. Flights to Shanghai will be about the same as Beijing.

Visiting Hong Kong:

- Mandarin Oriental Hong Kong starts at about \$551 per night. There is availability now but it's going fast.
- Harbour View Hotel Hong Kong starts at \$230 a night (there will be renovation going on during this time).
- JW Marriott Hotel Hong Kong starts at \$319 a night
- Crown Plaza Qingdao starts at \$429 a night
- Shangri-La Hotel, Qingdao starts at \$367 a night
- Grand Hyatt, Shanghai starts at \$288 a night
- Sofitel Hyland Shanghai starts at \$207

Wine tours

And, if you'd rather entertain yourself another way during the Olympics, then try a China wine tour. China Wine Tours offers 10-day tours with sommelier Paolo Wakham, with visits to several wineries in and around Beijing. This program includes all meals, cultural and acrobatic shows, and visits to artisan workshops. Hotels are four- and five-star accommodations. \$3,199 per person, double occupancy, plus \$230 tax.

There are also one-, two- and three-day tours for Olympic travelers.

There are also one-, two- and three-day tours for Olympic travelers. These are customized depending on whether you're doing a day trip (about \$100) or flying to outlying cities for overnight tours with hotels (up to \$1,000). Call George Aballi at 909-793-0328 x311, www.chinawinetours.com

Last but not least ...

Visa information

China continues to tighten its visa policy for the games. You may be asked to provide back-up documentation such as a hotel confirmation, an e-ticket (not a flight itinerary), proof of previous visa, host business or Foreign Ministry invitation letters from China, and certificates of financial guarantee. There have even been cases in which the government is requiring bank statements! With these new restrictions, visa companies are experiencing a significant backlog of Chinese visa requests but once you have all the required documents, it will still take only between two to seven days.

Peter Greenberg is TODAY's travel editor. His column appears weekly on TODAYshow.com. Visit his Web site at PeterGreenberg.com.

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