

TRAVEL

Edited by Nick Walton
nicholas.walton@scmp.com

There are some enchanting spots to explore on the way back from the Games, writes Nick Walton

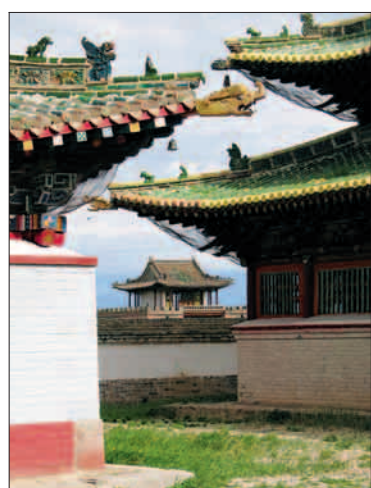


The placid waters of the Li River near Guilin in southern China. The area's gorgeous scenery featured as a backdrop in the movie *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Photo: Corbis

The long way home

The Beijing Games are about to begin and those lucky enough to be heading to the capital to watch the event are in for a two-week sporting extravaganza. But when the Games end, you might consider taking a little more time off to explore China and the region in all its splendour. After all, why rush back when there are so many great spots along the way?

Hainan Island
Tranquil Hainan Island was once a place of exile for dissidents but, with beautiful beaches, clear turquoise water and weather similar to Hawaii's, the island surely afforded them some consolation during their stint in the political wilderness. This southernmost province of China is one of the world's fastest developing hot spots for sun worshippers and luxury lovers. The tropical island was



A tranquil monastery in Karakorum, Mongolia. Photo: Susanne Wunderlich

relatively unknown to many westerners until it made headlines in 2001 when a US reconnaissance plane made an emergency landing there following a mid-air collision with a PLA fighter jet which had intercepted it. In recent years, big hotel resort names such as Pullman, Ritz-Carlton and Banyan Tree have opened on Hainan Island, which remains popular with naturalists and hikers. You can fly from Beijing to Hainan with Hainan Airlines and home via Dragonair (hnair.com and dragonair.com).

Mongolia
Once regarded as the final frontier for travellers to the region, Mongolia is in the midst of a development boom and visitors will be able to enjoy the contrast between a modern, thriving capital and the serenity of the country's plains and nomadic lifestyle. If you head there after the Games, you'll have plenty of time to catch the Nomad's Day Festival, held in the Gun-Galuu Nature Reserve in Tuv Province. Herdsmen and nomads come together to celebrate their culture with horsemanship displays, throat singing and the ancient ritual of fire and sky worshipping. Catch the Trans-Mongolian train from Beijing to Ulan Bator and take Mongolian Airlines and Dragonair home to Hong Kong. The festival begins on September 17 (miat.com, dragonair.com).

Urumqi
The capital of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region is a gateway to the ancient Silk Road that once stretched across Asia. Not all the faces you will see in Urumqi will be

of Han Chinese: there are many Muslim Uygurs, and Kazakhs and other ethnic minorities. From this ancient town you can explore the desolate beauty of the Gobi Desert, including the Turpan Depression, the second lowest exposed place in the world (after the Dead Sea), as well as ancient forts and palaces. Spend the day out on Heaven Lake, bathe in the Shuimugou Hot Springs and visit the Da Bazar Muslim night markets, where there is often live music and plenty of bargains. You can fly to Urumqi from Beijing on China Southern, which also flies to Hong Kong, or travel 45 hours by train across the Chinese landscape (flychinasouthern.com).

Guilin
For a scenic stopover on the way home, head to Guilin, which captured the world's attention when it featured as a backdrop to *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, one of the first blockbusters to spotlight China's gorgeous scenery. Its mountains and limestone caves, surrounded by mirror-like waterways and a distinctly rural ambience that seems unchanged since ancient times, make Guilin a great spot for hiking, river cruises and bike tours. This is a land of petite mountain-top pagodas, including the Puxian Pagoda built in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), and interestingly named attractions such as Elephant Trunk Hill and Peach Blossom River. The city has a population of about 1.3 million residents, and offers plenty of modern amenities so paying a visit won't take you too far out of your comfort zone. A number of airlines fly from Beijing to



Mongolia's vast open spaces would be a good place to wind down after the adrenaline rush of the Olympic Games. Photo: Oskar Henriksson

Guilin, including Air China, Hainan Airlines and China Southern, which also fly to Hong Kong (flychinasouthern.com, airchina.com.cn, hnair.com).

Yangtze River
The longest river in Asia and the third longest in the world after the Nile and the Amazon, the Yangtze is fundamental to China's history,

society and culture. The best way to experience the mighty Yangtze is by cruise vessel and there are plenty of lines and itineraries to choose from, whether you are flying to the famed Three Gorges Dam or more commonly, travelling up the river from Shanghai. China Eastern will get you from Beijing to Shanghai for your cruise, and then on to Hong Kong (ce-air.com).

Entrée: South Pacific

The South Pacific remains one of the world's most beautiful locales, with inviting beaches on idyllic atolls and islands across an azure sea. But just in case you thought you'd have to trade gastronomy for a suntan, gourmets have a wide variety of venues to choose from in the region.

Bloody Mary's Bora Bora, French Polynesia
boraboraisland.com/bloodymarys

One of the Pacific's most famous restaurants, Bloody Mary's has attained iconic status and remains a popular spot for celebrities looking for fresh seafood and spectacular sunsets.

The restaurant is popular with yachting enthusiasts and those who choose from an ice bed of local seafood, which is cooked to order in front of you, or escape from the heat of the day with their gourmet lunch menu.

Tamarind Restaurant, Rarotonga, Cook Islands
tamarind.co.ck

Housed in a heritage building that was constructed for the Union Steam Ship company in 1910 and also served as the British consul's residence, Tamarind fuses the Cook Islands' cultural influences, from its Polynesian roots through to its close relationship to the British Empire.

It is a popular stop for the island's powerbrokers in the evenings. Enjoy a cocktail on the terrace complete with postcard sunset, before dining on local specialities and a menu of seasonal fare. They include chicken breast with mascarpone and toasted cashew nut stuffing and mango sauce, seared big eye tuna with wasabi hollandaise and mahi mahi (dolphin fish) wrapped in filo with taro leaves, coconut and basil and lemon grass sauce.



Photo courtesy Starwood Hotels

Dining Room & Bar, Jean-Michel Cousteau Resort, Vanua Levu, Fiji
fijiresort.com

The award-winning restaurant at Jean-Michel Cousteau's is known across the Pacific for its contemporary twist on traditional Fijian cuisine. With sea views and a

spectacular temple-styled roof, this is the best of resort dining. Chef Dor Sami uses organic ingredients grown in the resort's gardens to create innovative, palate-challenging cuisine. For a romantic experience, have your dinner at the end of the pier under the stars, or try the Fijian lovo feast, cooked in an earth oven under the coconut palms.

L' Hippocampe, Le Meridien Hotel, Noumea, New Caledonia
starwoodhotels.com

New Caledonia, like French Polynesia, has a beautiful fusion of cultures and that is reflected in the menu at L'Hippocampe (left). Its kitchen is run by chef Jean Claude Segard, famed for dishes such as New Zealand lamb glazed with chilli and local coca, and cooked slowly for more than 45 hours until it is incredibly tender, and sweet and

sour champagne jelly. There is also an extensive wine list.

Chantilly's on the Bay, Port Vila, Vanuatu, Tel: +67 8 27079
chantillysonthebay.com

Known for its eclectic, modern menu, this is a great place to spend a warm evening in Port Vila before heading out to the islands of the archipelago. The menu features dishes such as white Ajo Blanco gazpacho with almonds and garlic; pork, ginger, vanilla dumplings with tahini yoghurt dipping sauce; and goat cheese soufflé topped with sliced cured duck breast drizzled with a spicy plum dressing. The list changes with the seasons and includes vegetarian and gluten-free dishes. There are plenty of tapas dishes if you are just looking for a snack with your sundowner.

Nick Walton

Detours: Qingdao

Mark Andrews

Beer is not the first thing people associate with China, but Tsingtao is probably the country's best known brand. It's a product of the vicissitudes of history, a direct result of the foreign domination of Qingdao in the 20th century.

The Beer Museum in Qingdao, which opened in 2003, the brewery's centennial year, is as much about the town as about the product.

Germany was a latecomer to territorial acquisition in China. After two German missionaries were killed in China in the late 19th century, Kaiser Wilhelm II forced the Qing government into ceding Qingdao in 1897 for 99 years. The city was then little more than a fishing village, but the Germans had grand plans.

One of their first steps was to open the brewery in 1903. It is at this point that the museum takes up the story. The "A building" charts the history of Tsingtao Beer. Production initially centred on a pilsner and a dark beer for consumption in Qingdao and by foreigners across China. At that time the beer was brewed in accordance with the German Reinheitsgebot purity law of 1516, using spring water from nearby Laoshan and imported barley and hops.

Japanese troops took control of Qingdao during the first world war. Ownership of the brewery passed to the Dai Nippon Brewery which ran it up to 1945. With the defeat of the

Japanese, the brewery came under Chinese control. Since 1979, the brewery has expanded rapidly with growth in the home market and rising exports.

The "B building" looks at the brewing process. A tour takes in the old copper kettles from the original factory, followed by a mock-up of the brewing lab. A series of displays tout the brewery's green credentials and then it's a quick explanation of traditional fermentation techniques before moving on to the storage cellar. Another section is devoted to the history of beer.

Unlike many brewery tours, this is not a quick talk followed by an hour of drinking. However, a brief tasting awaits in a small bar. What follows is a contrast of new and old as the tour takes in the filter plant and packaging department. Antiquated machines used in the early years overlook the modern plant.

Finally, visitors get to sample a jug of Qingdao's finest. Sadly, the bar only serves standard Tsingtao draft beer rather than other varieties such as the dark or the new bottled pure draft. Nonetheless, the museum and tour affords a good understanding of the brewery's history and the brewing process.

Qingdao will host the sailing events at the 2008 Olympics, Aug 9-23. Tsingtao Beer Museum, 56 Dengzhou Rd, Qingdao, 50 yuan (HK\$57), tel: 86 532 8382 1169



Copper kettles at the Tsingtao Brewery in Qingdao. Photo: Mark Andrews

Big deal

Edited by Nick Walton
nicholas.walton@scmp.com

The luxurious Nexus Resort Karamunai in the East Malaysian state of Sabah, in association with wotif.com, has a great package for those looking to explore ancient jungles and untouched beaches. Get an Ocean Wing Deluxe package for RM460 (HK\$1106) a night including accommodation for two in a deluxe room with views of the garden, beach and sea, and buffet breakfast for two. Located 30km northeast of Kota Kinabalu, on natural and landscaped surroundings on the spectacular



Karamunai peninsula, this is a world away from the rat race of Hong Kong yet only a few hours by flight. Check out wotif.com/hotelW39362 for bookings.

CHINA'S GOLDEN HOPES

Learn all about China's 50 top medal hopes in **Beijing Olympic 2008 - Going for Gold - Team China**, a colourful 24-page tabloid section that's packed with photographs, interviews and informative athlete biographies.

FREE TOMORROW