

Fun and games

Not everyone loves the Olympics

LONDON'S leisure industry hopes for a bonanza next July and August, thanks to the Olympics. To lure hordes of visitors, a campaign marketing Britain abroad has been launched with the slogan "You're invited". But they may not come.

When Britain won the right to host the Olympics in 2005, ministers promised a windfall not just for sport but for tourism. Previous hosts held similar hopes, and were mostly disappointed. Since the 1992 Barcelona games, hosts have seen a fall in foreign guests during each Olympics, as well as in the months before and after, says the European Tour Operators Association (ETOA), a trade body. In Beijing, hotel bookings in August 2008 were 39% lower than they had been a year earlier.

The belief that a city will be expensive and chock-a-block with sports fans can deter visitors. Official advice this time reinforces that notion: Transport for London, which runs most of the capital's transit system, has asked locals to stockpile goods and stay at home to ease congestion.

Fully 4.2m foreign tourists came to London in the summer of 2010, as well as 3m British ones. The government has belatedly acknowledged that it would be a shame to lose them. Speaking at a trade fair for the tourism industry on November 7th, Jeremy Hunt, the culture secretary, expressed confidence that Britain could "defy the tourism dip" other hosts have experienced.

Early signs are not encouraging. A sample poll of tour operators by ETOA suggests 2012 bookings are a fifth lower than at this time last year; for the Olympic period they are even slower, in part because some hotels are demanding money up front. That does not mean the games will be a commercial disaster: Olympic organisers have already reserved a third of London's hotel rooms for athletes, officials, sponsors and the media. But hotels may not see the high demand -or high prices- they expect. Barcelona and Athens did not fill their 13,000-16,000 rooms. London has 125,000.

London's proximity to other destinations normally lifts its tourist trade: it is Europe's most-visited city. But this may be a disadvantage when it comes to hanging on to Olympic spectators. Of the past three games, people stayed for longer in Sydney and Beijing than they did in Athens, which, like London, is a short-haul trip for many international passengers.

In fact, most fans are likely to be local: British residents have bought 95% of the 3.5m tickets sold so far, reports the London 2012 Organising Committee. Since much of the population lives within a day's commute of the capital, many ticket-holders could bypass the city's other offerings. They are likely to spend money on some things, of course. "These people still have to eat," points out Miles Quest of the British Hospitality Association.

Sensing weakness in London, Scotland's tourist board has revved up its marketing operation. But it, too, may crash into a hurdle. In Greece, the Ionian Islands and other tourist hotspots suffered even more during the 2004 Olympic slump than did Athens, reckons ETOA.

Determined not to be judged by medal tables alone, London will stage a cultural extravaganza around the Olympics. Yet the city's routine cultural offerings are far from scant - and some question whether the city really needs to sell its brand. The 2008 Beijing Olympics was a chance for China to display its wealth and prowess. Britain, by contrast, already has one of the best-developed tourist markets in the world. Yet the long-term benefit of hosting a slick and beautiful games may become apparent in the long run. The nation's boosters must be hoping that, even if they do not come next year, prospective tourists are at least watching from afar.