



Beijing's new revolution

There's more to savour in the city than just the ubiquitous Bird's Nest.

A journey of a thousand miles begins with the first step – and if that first step into China lands you in Beijing, you're in for an unforgettable journey. Beijing has the historic heft of Athens and Cairo, the imposing majesty of Moscow and London, but also the pulsating energy of Tokyo and New York.

The Olympics certainly brought it up to speed with the world at large. Thanks to global coverage, the Bird's Nest stadium and the Water Cube aquatic centre have since ascended to become iconic Chinese landmarks as eagerly photographed as the Great Wall and the Forbidden City.

The past few years have witnessed a furious building frenzy, altering the face of the city dramatically. Fortunately, Beijing's super-wide avenues and giant land plots have managed to preserve a decent distance between the concrete monoliths, so that the city doesn't feel as cramped as other Asian cities, like Hong Kong, Bangkok or Kuala Lumpur.

And so the cutting-edge new and the classical old entwine here in a curious and captivating

mix. First-timers will find much that's mind-boggling, while returnees will uncover a lot of surprises in Beijing as well.

SOMETHING OLD

The Forbidden City will make first-timers go weak in the knees. Literally. Embark on a tour through the palace grounds, and you'll feel as if you've stumbled into a devious Chinese box – where layer upon layer opens up. Beyond each majestic gate, archway, and door lies another inner court, within an outer courts, leading into royal chambers, spreading out to antechambers... the scale and complexity of the site is just overwhelming. The world's largest palace complex, covering 74 hectares and containing 9,999 rooms, was built nearly five centuries ago, but it still exudes gracious timelessness.

No less atmospheric is the Summer Palace, situated an hour outside the city centre. Built like an imperial garden, the lakeside palace has a poetic grandeur, with endless wooden corridors, bronze statues, stone bridges, incense towers, even a marble boat.



SOMETHING NEW

Another good reason to wander out of the city centre is the Olympic Village. Yes, where you can visit the Bird's Nest and Water Cube.

Ready tours zip you out to the Village 30 minutes away, where you can stroll through the hallowed halls where records were shattered, and headlines made: "Phelps wins again!" or "Lu Xiang pulls out!" Join thousands of local and foreign tourists as they pose happily against the two architectural marvels that have seared their way into our collective consciousness. Honestly, can anyone remember what the Olympics stadiums in Sydney, Athens or Los Angeles look like?

Designed by Swiss firm Herzog and de Meuron, the 100,000-seater sports stadium famously features a twig-like mass of steel that bends and swerves to form a Bird's Nest. The structure is bigger and more staggering in real-life. And up close, the Water Cube is also bizarrely intriguing: Its translucent surface gleaming temptingly like giant bubble wrap waiting to be popped.

Beijing has become a platform for all that's new and audacious in architecture. Design aficionados will want to check out the National Centre for the Performing Arts. Designed by French architect Paul Andreu, the new arts centre is housed in an ellipsoidal dome in the middle of a pool, sitting solid like some ancient, prehistoric egg.

And you won't miss the new CCTV headquarters downtown, designed by Dutch starchitect Rem Koolhaas. Yet-to-be-opened, the US\$600 million (S\$900 million), 60-storey building resembles an awkwardly assembled lego block with giant legs akimbo.

Reinvention is also popular, and has seen life injected into the more staid areas of the city. One such re-purposed centre is the Legation Quarter, a Dempsey-like cluster of bars and restaurants set on the grounds of the former American Embassy. Stylishly appointed French, Italian, Japanese and Spanish eateries provide a rarefied atmosphere for Beijing's monied smooth operators – to network, or perhaps lament their latest stock losses.

Less austere and more charming is 1949: The Hidden City, a courtyard-style F&B hotspot set within the industrial-chic compound of the former Beijing Machinery and Electric Institute. Here you'll find an art gallery, a bar, a



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Above, from left: A guard patrols the Forbidden City. A woman views the works of one of Beijing's many emerging artists.

Opposite, from top: Beijing's National Centre for Performing arts. St Regis' chandeliered lobby. Mao books on sale.

café, noodle house – and probably the best Peking duck on the continent.

Duck de Chine certainly pulls out all the stops: A gong sounds when your order is wheeled out ceremoniously, whereupon a very professional carving procedure takes place. A masked apprentice deftly slices the gloriously plump duck into tantalising portions, which are then greedily consumed with steamed, tissue-thin pancakes and copious amounts of home-made *hoisin* sauce. One word: Exquisite.

You'll find that grand flourishes are a trademark in Beijing. Even boutique hotels, once the epitome of understated elegance, can't resist the bells and whistles. The newly opened Aloft (sister brand of W Hotels) serves up free-n-easy urban chic, while The Opposite House (by Japanese architect Kengo Kuma) oozes *über* cool. Both flaunt open, airy spaces bursting with colour, stylishly fitted out with smart hi-tech mod-cons, anxiously awaiting the arrival of *Wallpaper*-trained urbanites.

But for good old-fashioned luxury

befitting this classic city, my hotel of choice would be St Regis. Recently refurbished, the seriously upscale address is a hard act to beat. Meals are remarkably impressive. A lunch at Danieli's turns out to be a surprisingly hearty Italian affair, while Cantonese *dim sum* at Celestial Court charms with its subtle delicate flavours.

What sets the St Regis apart from the newbies is a sense of tradition. Here, service is more than impeccable. Where else will you find a personal butler who not only helps you unpack, but also discreetly takes your suitcases away to get them fumigated (!) and cleaned?

I swallow my pride and am rendered speechless when my two world-weary Samsonite bags return the next day bright as buttons – embarrassingly clean – along with a white rose and a personally written note from my butler.

I make a mental note to be kinder to my bags as I do languid laps in the hotel's glass-enclosed Roman-style pool, and soak in the wondrous pleasures of 21st century Beijing. **A**