



## Medical and Security Challenges

# Beijing Olympic Games

## Are YOU ready?

by Richard Culver

The Olympic Games have become one of the world's largest sporting events where visitors congregate from many different cultures and languages. For the host country, it is an opportunity to showcase itself internationally. All eyes will be on the scenery and the facilities, with even more scrutiny placed on how well the games are organized and executed.

More than four million people are expected to descend on China for the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games. Unlike prior competitions, where the host city is the central location for sporting venues, the Olympic Games in China will have events taking place at 31 locations. This makes the Games particularly challenging from both a medical and security perspective.

The venues include Shanghai, Qingdao, Qinhuangdao, Hong Kong, Tianjin and Shenyang. Some of these locations are a 10-hour train ride, or two-hour flight away from Beijing.

For corporations sending clients to watch the Games, or those deploying employees to assist with business for the

Games, ensuring that these visitors have a truly safe and enjoyable experience will take exceptionally detailed planning and coordination.

While the tremendous growth of China's economy means first class hotels and fine dining will be available for visitors in city centers, the quality of healthcare may prove most discomfoting. China's healthcare system is undergoing rapid change, and there is still a substantial gap in its quality compared to western expectations. Standards vary widely and visitors should not expect the same level of medical care that they get at home.

For example, ambulances may not be of an international standard and waiting times can be lengthy. Furthermore, payment for treatment is usually asked for in cash upfront, with credit cards rarely accepted. Prompt attention can be further complicated since local hospitals have limited experience with international medical insurers. Other concerns include hygiene and sterilization problems and a potential shortage of RH-negative blood, found in 15 percent of

Westerners but only three in 10,000 Chinese people. Chinese health authorities have already begun a campaign to build up the supply to prevent a shortage for athletes during the Games.

In some places, there may also be a tendency to favor traditional Chinese medicine, which is not always suitable for some Western patients.

Companies with staff or guests in China for the Games should be prepared for a wide variety of possible medical problems ranging from complications from pre-existing conditions, to food and water borne diseases, heat stress and stroke, minor sprains and fractures, traffic accidents, and respiratory ailments related to high pollution levels.

As with all large events where groups of visitors come together, security is also a major concern. Issues range from mild disturbances and theft to potential natural disasters and terrorism. The language barrier may exacerbate issues. Even making a police report can be complicated when languages don't align.

Speculation on budget levels for the Beijing Olympics' security preparations cannot be confirmed because authorities there have not shared the figures.

So what can companies who are sending employees and guests to China do? Perhaps the following suggestions might prove a good start:

**Know the risks.** Ensure visitors know before they leave what diseases they may encounter and what security issues for which they should be prepared. The federal Department of Foreign Affairs maintains a travel update website that lists all countries and the current status at [www.voyage.gc.ca](http://www.voyage.gc.ca). Information includes warnings and recommendations, a list of Canadian government contacts in the

country, a summary of local laws and customs, plus climate and health information. Assistance companies can also offer pre-travel information, highlighting other essential information relating to vaccination requirements, personal and driving safety information, cultural information, crime and more. Currently, there is no travel warning listed for China.

**Find Experienced Professionals.** Consider engaging an international assistance company that can help you plan for and deal with any medical or security issues that may affect your employees or guests from translation services to emergency medical evacuation and repatriation.

**Plan for the Unlikely (but Possible).**

Make sure your employees and guests take measures ahead of time to ensure they know how to best safeguard their health and safety when traveling to China. Encourage them to find out what immunizations they need and to get them. Not only should itineraries be left with the employer, but travelers should leave detailed copies of their itinerary with friends and family back home. Remind them to take an ample supply of prescription and routine medication in their carry-on luggage. Also, travelers may find it useful to bring a first-aid kit, as these are not readily available in China.

**Purchase a Translation Dictionary.**

Learning a few basics of the Chinese language will help everyone navigate through their journey.

**Back it up:** Ensure your employees and guests have access to their vital documents even when away from home. Before they leave, ensure they scan copies of passports, driver's licenses and credit cards. Have those documents emailed to an account the traveller can access from the Internet. Tell them to ensure emergency contacts are listed in multiple places.

**Reduce the Risk of Theft and Assault.**

Travelers can take some common sense precautions to lessen the likelihood of a serious incident. For example, they should refrain from wearing expensive jewellery or watches, avoid carrying all their money in one location, and consider carrying a 'robbery wallet' with old credit cards and a small amount of cash that can be handed over if robbed. Pickpockets can be any age or either sex and often use knives to cut bags and back pockets. Hotel room doors should always be locked. Find out what districts are dangerous, and let your employees and guests know so they can avoid these areas when alone or at night.

Taking precautions, doing your homework and using common sense will help ensure your visitors experience is a truly rewarding one and they will thus enjoy the Beijing Games. **S**

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