

Editor's comment from *City Profiles* No. 14 – December 2003

Are the Olympics really good for tourism?

The subject of one of our main city profiles this month, London, is all agog about the recent decision to bid for the 2012 Summer Olympics. A successful bid could lift London's tourism profile over the next few years, some in the sector believe, but failure could simply serve to emphasise London's difficulties as a tourism destination.

Clearly, in the longer term, the Olympics would bring improved infrastructure, new facilities and especially the regeneration of a large swathe of socially deprived ex-industrial land in east London, from the lower River Lea at Bromley-by-Bow to the old dog racing track and future stadium at Hackney Wick. Furthermore, among the many claims made by those backing the bid to bring the 2012 Olympics to London is the hope that a London Olympics would inspire a future generation of athletes at a time when British athletics is in the doldrums.

Yet, although these would all be positive developments for the city as a whole, it is not at all certain that the tourism industry would stand to benefit. Big events are known to discourage normal tourism and the likely media frenzy about London's overloaded transport systems and inadequate tourist accommodation would not help. The focus of infrastructure preparations on a part of London that has few other tourism attractions will do nothing to relieve central London's well-known deficiencies in these respects.

Anyway, London must first win the 2012 Games. And few of the city's supporters, including a large share of the tourism industry itself, seem to have any idea of the strength of the competition the UK capital faces – even just in Europe.

Paris thinks so ...

A visit to the World Athletics Championships last summer – not to mention a walk around the streets in the neighbourhood of the Stade de France – was a reminder of how far off the pace London is, both in terms of proving its ability to handle such an event and in terms of infrastructure development. The French government reportedly committed euro 28.2 million of the total euro 59.5 million budget for the nine-day athletics event – not solely because of its commitment to athletics, but because it wanted to impress those who will decide where to stage the 2012 Olympics.

After the Football World Cup, the final stages of the Tour de France and world championships in a number of other sports, such as volleyball, handball, boxing, judo and table tennis, the French capital has had ample opportunity to impress the leaders of international sport. And neither the government nor big business (nor for that matter the public) seems scared of the potential cost of hosting the Olympics – between euro 2 billion and euro 7 billion.

Brussels, Milan and Prague are now said to be thinking of bidding to host the 2016 Summer Olympics, but none of these is likely to win if 2012 goes to a European city. Of the three, Brussels has to be the favourite as the bid – actually from the regional government of Flanders, but backed by the Brussels City Council – has the support of Jacques Rogge, chairman of the International Olympic Committee (IOC), and a Belgian. Rogge has already gone on record

praising Brussels's many hotels, the proximity of the airport to the city centre and the King Baudouin Stadium, which seats 47,500.

The IOC will not select a host until 2009 and the Belgian capital's potential non-European competitors include Pusan (in South Korea) and an undetermined city in Chile.

**... but few in Greece
believe the Athens
Olympics will stimulate
tourism growth**

Meanwhile, necessary infrastructure and superstructure developments for next year's Athens Olympics are months behind the strict schedule laid down by the IOC's experts. Transport is one of the major areas of concern – especially work on tram and rail lines.

While grudgingly admitting that the 2004 Games will probably open on target, despite all the problems, Greece's travel and tourism industry is much more concerned about the Greek government's failure to leverage the Olympics to boost tourism demand. Investment in marketing and promotion has been negligible, most say, and one of the major advertisements to be developed would seem to have missed the mark completely:

"There is no place like home," the advertisement reads, suggesting to potential foreign tourists that they might as well stay in their home countries rather than – as the ad was intended – going to Greece where the Olympics all began.