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Amid Putin's Crackdown, Sochi Gay Scene Thrives

By The Moscow Times

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Dancers performing in Mayak, one of two gay clubs in Sochi, where the upcoming Winter Olympics will be held. **Sergei Grits**

A man named Ravil catapults onto the dance floor and starts stomping out the *lezginka*, the arrogant rooster strut of the Chechen national dance.

Ravil's spontaneous performance is made even more unusual by the fact that he is in one of the two gay clubs in Sochi, the southern Russian town that will host the Winter Olympics amid President Vladimir Putin's harsh crackdown on gays. The morality campaign, centered on a law banning homosexual "propaganda," has threatened to overshadow the games as it provoked an international outcry.

Paradoxically, Sochi is a far cry from the conservative lifestyle that the president is trying to promote.

At club Mayak, for example, the dancers are as diverse as the city itself: a Muslim who is a former market butcher, an Armenian who owns a strip club in a nearby town, a Ukrainian who loves to sing like Whitney Houston and dress like Adele.

And the men behind Mayak are hopeful that Sochi can remain the exception to the rule as its entrepreneurial, anything-goes crowd prepares to welcome the world. "This is a resort town," says Andrei Tenichev, the owner. "We have a saying: Money does not smell of anything."

Tenichev moved to the south from the bustling boomtown of Moscow when he saw that Sochi desperately needed another gay hangout. Opening Mayak was a no-brainer, "money lying on the ground," he says and even on a rainy Monday in September, the club's cabaret show attracted at least 70 guests.

The club owner, who worked in a gay bar in Moscow before opening Mayak eight years ago, says the climate for his line of business is even better in Sochi. In Moscow, some liquor brands refused to sell to the bar, saying "A gay bar is not our style."

In Sochi, "We sell more expensive liquor than anywhere else in this town," Tenichev says proudly.

He expects tacit cooperation with the local government to last at least through the Olympics in February. The Russian Olympic Committee has not made any trouble for the club, he says, because "they do not want the slightest scandal" ahead of the games. But he also hopes that gay culture in Sochi has a better chance of surviving than in other parts of Russia, despite Putin's crackdown.

The city was a gay hub in Soviet times, a fact facilitated by the Soviet Union's closed borders, an easygoing southern temperament and, for many visitors, a healthy distance from family and friends back home, giving the place a "what-happens-in-Sochi-stays-in-Sochi" appeal.

Valery Kosachenko, an enormous man in a Hawaiian T-shirt and tiny rain boots, is a regular at Mayak. He was born in Azerbaijan and spent much of his life working in a cafeteria in Novy Urengoi, a city on the subarctic tundra most known for its bountiful gas fields. Every year since the early 1980s, Kosachenko and his Ukrainian truck driver boyfriend would make the liberating trip down south.

Kosachenko, 56, still gets misty-eyed over Soviet-era gay culture, where gays would gather under the watchful eyes of the local Lenin statue. They referred to it as Grandma Lena, a disgruntled but beloved patron saint of their nightly romps.

Homosexuality was a federal crime in Russia until 1993, but in Soviet times cafe owners were tacitly glad to garner a reputation as a gay hangout: It brought extra cash flooding in, and a few extra bribes were enough to keep the police at bay.

Public affection with other men was easier than it is now, Kosachenko says. In his opinion, the laidback lifestyle and southern effusiveness for which Sochi was known meant that few people interpreted such casual displays as immoral, partly because of a widespread ignorance about homosexuality.

"Sochi is a multinational city, they are relaxed about everyone," he said. "And before, people did not know anything about it [homosexuality], and so no one thought much of a hug or putting your arm around someone."

The ethnic diversity applies to Mayak itself, where Tenichev estimates that more than 30 percent of his clientele is from the Caucasus, the mountainous ethnic patchwork that encompasses Georgia, Armenia and much of Russia's restive south. Next to Halloween, the club's biggest events are its "Caucasian Nights," in which dancers dress up like big-eyed Armenian girls or Chechen warriors.

Ravil, the lezginka dancer who had just turned 29, sat in the back of the club with three dozen roses in his lap and held hands with Sasha, his boyfriend. Neither gave their surnames in Russia's current homophobic climate.

"There is a tolerance here, both in terms of ethnicity and orientation," Sasha said. "But you see for yourself what kind of laws our government is passing, how people relate to us, how religion relates to us. The iron curtain starts here."

Sochi, however, is not an escape for everyone. Many gays who grew up here are chained to the same family and social pressures as in any other Russian provincial town.

Vlad Slavsky, 17, realized he was gay two years ago. He did not tell anyone at school, but his classmates found out, and he thinks they may have hacked his social network account.

"In school there is a prison mentality, they live by prison rules," he said, describing more than 10 physical attacks near his home and constant taunts from other schoolmates. He now carries pepper spray and takes a taxi if he is coming home late.

But those at Mayak manage to live fluid and flexible lives. Sergei Baklykov, the 32-year-old Ukrainian who sings like Whitney Houston, says he wanted to be a woman for a while and the others rib him, joking that he gave up "because it was too expensive."

While Mayak's regulars have been able to adapt, they are hardly activists. Baklykov said he was "apolitical" and did not want to be involved in the LGBT movement in its present state because he believes "it does not have a leader."

While Sochi still serves as a refuge for Russian gays, the growing conservatism of the Russian public has meant that many find it easier, and cheaper, to travel abroad. Those who are left tend to be older or poorer.

Tenichev says the number of gay visitors is naturally dropping, which has meant opening Mayak's doors more and more often to other visitors, in particular to straight women.

"It is hard nowadays to call this a gay club," he said, noting that the average age of the gay visitors is increasing, and is now easily over 30.

"I am drawn by what is abroad," said Kosachenko, who described a recent trip to the Canary Islands as mind-blowing. "But this is my own, and I am used to it. Here I feel at home, so I will learn to adapt."

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