

For Visitors and Residents, Olympics One Big Party

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Canadian snowboarders Christopher Robanske, left, and compatriot Kevin Hill playing with a tennis ball while waiting during a delay in snowboardcross. **Mike Blake**

SOCHI — Every night of the Olympics, celebratory fireworks light up the dark sky above Sochi, a vivid reminder that what is purely a sporting event for television audiences watching from home is a non-stop festival for visitors on the ground.

Since there are no sporting events in the town itself, the one main giveaway that the Winter Games are in full swing here is the swarms of people along the waterfront despite the fact that it is the off-season.

Sporting events are hidden beneath the shining domes of newly built venues, and from the outside the scene resembles one giant fair.

In the evenings, guests end up dispersed in Sochi's numerous clubs, be it the posh London pub

or the more affordable Khuan Ivanych, opened by a Cuban and known for its wild parties.

Only a select few are able to walk along the terraces of the ornate Bosco house, where Russia's political and cultural luminaries assemble, including President Vladimir Putin's press secretary Dmitry Peskov and RT's editor Margarita Simonyan. One of Russia's most popular evening talk shows, Vecherniy Urgant, is filmed next door, with the host joking casually with Russia's newest Olympic medallists.

Despite controversy over Russia's anti-gay propaganda law, even the main gay club in town, Cabaret Mayak, has received unprecedented attention during the Games.

The club was thrust into the spotlight after more than 150 journalists visited it ahead of the Games. It offers a "Best Of" program during the Olympics featuring Russia's most famous transvestite actors, Zaza Napoli and Penelopa Galogen, mocking their own unexpected and abrupt fame.

Amid concerns over how gays would be treated during the Games, the club was co-opted by the city's administration. Sochi Mayor Anatoly Pakhomov acknowledged that he met with the club's owner to offer reassurances at a news conference on Monday.



Morry Gash / AP

Spectators cheering while watching the medal ceremonies in Medals Plaza at the Winter Olympics on Sunday.

"We tell everybody, regardless of their sexual orientation — Welcome to Sochi!" he said.

For the more sophisticated audience in Sochi, Russia's Grammy-award winning violist and conductor Yuri Bashmet oversees a classical and jazz music festival held every night in Sochi's grand Winter Theater. Bashmet's orchestra recorded parts of the opening and closing ceremonies for the Games. But Bashmet's time in Sochi is not limited to the Olympics; he has plans to turn the city's music festival into one that will rival the famous Salzburg Festival.

Fifty kilometers from central Sochi, life is drastically different. In the Olympic Park in Adler, guests may not even be able to tell that they are in Russia. The food on offer in the Olympic Park is mostly hot dogs, pizza and other fast food, and looking around the crowd, one gets the impression that this is not the most expensive Olympics in history but a rock festival for those over 30 years old.

Tens of thousands of people come to the Olympic park every day, the organizers said.

"We are quite happy with the atmosphere in the venues. At the events, we are having 20,000 spectators every night," said president of the Sochi 2014 Organizing Committee Dmitry Chernyshenko.

More than 1 million tickets to Olympic sporting events were sold as of Sunday, with around 100,000 visitors present in the city each day.

People line up to get into numerous pavilions selling Olympic merchandise, exhibiting the achievements of various Russian regions or advertising Olympic sponsors. Visitors hoping to get a souvenir from the official Olympics store have to wait for about two hours to get in. According to the store's website, it sells 150 shirts and 70 jackets each hour.

There are no lines in front of the Canadian and U.S. team houses, but the explanation for that is simple: they operate on an invitation-only policy, just like the main party venue of the Olympic club, the IOC's hospitality house, a three-story building next to Fisht Stadium.

The Swiss pavilion is more accommodating to visitors, with free access to daily concerts and other functions, not to mention sausages and Russian beer for sale. The main party pavilion is the Dutch one, with its daily techno house parties.

Around 20,000 people gather in the Medals Plaza every night for the awards ceremony, which is followed by a concert featuring both Russian and international pop stars. The mood is usually euphoric, especially among those who see their fellow countrymen up on the athletes' pedestal.

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