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More Adventures in Sochi

By Scott Antel

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Friday, Feb. 14. 08:00. After a short week at work, I play "hooky" and head back to Sochi early Friday morning. Domodedovo Airport security is much more vigilant than at Sheremetyevo the week before, and they confiscate my tiny tube of toothpaste and lip balm. The flight is clearly an Olympic "fan bus" and predominantly Russian.

Many fans have caught the Olympic spirit at the last minute and bought tickets online. The Sochi ticket website is extremely user-friendly and far better than the one during the London Games. Very impressive.

11:00. I invited a Norwegian friend, who also heads a large Western hotel group, to join me. He offers to help me secure a hotel room, which is badly needed, given the shortage in Sochi. We are based at the International Olympic Committee headquarters hotel in the Olympic Park. This is not an "ordinary" fan experience by any means.

17:00. Olympic Park prior to figure skating final. Foreign fans have finally surfaced — notably South Koreans, Japanese, Dutch and a mix of others. The myriad terrorist threats — disguised

Olympic volunteers, rabid dogs, toothpaste bombs and computer malware — that were enthusiastically propagated by Western security interests have not materialized, and the fans have decided to enjoy one of the greatest shows in sports history.

At the same time, however, these Games have far fewer international guests than previous ones, which is a shame as they add the international flavor to the event and temper excessive "nationalism." The predominantly Russian crowd has been enthusiastic for their team, while being fair and sportsmanlike for all participants, as they should.

19:00. Figure skating final. Russians are proving themselves knowledgeable winter sports spectators, a positive remnant of the Soviet sports tradition. I remember the Beijing Games in 2008, where the otherwise enthusiastic locals were often clueless about the primarily Western sports, and organizers handed out instruction guides explaining the different sports.

23:00. Leaving Olympic Park, plenty of young women in miniskirts and high heels. You did not see that at Lillehammer or London. This is one more example that Russian women never let anything get in the way of fashion.

The predominantly young volunteers have really grown in confidence over the past week as the Games have gone smoothly. Plenty of jokes and enthusiasm in evidence. This army of volunteers — not the government — is what really makes these events work. Once you are inside the Olympic venues, the IOC and the respective sports federations choreograph these events like clockwork and could run them on the moon. They have it down to precision.

Saturday, Feb. 15. Curling in the morning, hockey in the afternoon, and the ski jump final at the mountain cluster in the evening. Hockey is one of the few full venues in evidence. Hockey is clearly the medal the Russians want the most, as it was at Vancouver for the Canadians.

18:00. It is 12 degrees Celsius in Athens, 14 C in Barcelona, 19 C at the coastal Olympic Park and 15 C at the mountain clusters. Why did I lug my coat to the Winter Olympics? Apart from the venue paths, most of the nonman-made snow has melted to ground cover at the mountain cluster. It would be charitable to say the mountain cluster facilities — apart from the competition venues — are finished. Still much work to be done.

00:00. Ski jump final. Lots of colorfully dressed Japanese, Norwegians and Poles — the sport's traditional powers — in evidence. The Poles win.

Taking the Siemens-built bullet train back down the valley to the Olympic Park, I comment that there has not been a lot of "import substitution" in the making of these Games. So much of the infrastructure, equipment and apparatus that has gone in to these Games is foreign-made. But that is the issue for the country at large, which produces little besides raw materials. That has to change.

02:00. A lot of sports for one day. I'm beat. Take a beeline for the bed.

These Games are mirroring the eight I have attended: a great spectacle of sports transcending politics, security and other hucksters that try to tag along.

Scott Antel is an attorney living in Russia for 20 years and has attended eight Olympic Games.

The views expressed in opinion pieces do not necessarily reflect the position of The Moscow Times.

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