

# Sochi Calls Up Army of Buses for Olympic Fans

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A Liaz bus, fresh from the production line to service Olympic fans, standing underneath a row of palms in Sochi.

SOCHI — For the last Winter Games, in Vancouver, the city's transit agency acquired 180 buses. At the current Games in Sochi, that number is up fivefold.

But do not rush to pin the astounding number entirely on Russia's general extravagance around the sporting event. The transit officials supervising the increased traffic during the Games say the streets are not wide enough to accommodate super large buses, so a greater number of smaller vehicles are on hand.

Painted in icy white and blue colors, the buses have already been through one of the Games' sternest tests: the transit of spectators leaving the Feb. 7 opening ceremony, a show that won worldwide accolades.

In tandem with the city's new trains, they carried 40,000 fans from Sochi's Fisht Stadium in 1 hour 20 minutes, setting a new efficiency record for the city, said Vyacheslav Bauer, who is in charge of passenger transit at the Olympic Games Transportation Directorate.

The number of fans leaving the stadium constituted one tenth of the population of greater Sochi, he said.

Bauer was quick to admit that transit systems in Moscow and similar cities with wide highways would cope with the task faster — perhaps in less than an hour. But then, these cities would likely use buses that are 18-meters long.

"The narrow streets here would not permit that," he said, adding that Sochi is made for 15-meter creatures at the most.

The overwhelming majority of the buses came from billionaire Oleg Deripaska's business empire, prominently displaying their Liaz and Golaz brand names. Jointly made with Scania, a Swedish car manufacturer, they are a product of GAZ Group. Other buses employed by the Olympic organizers had their logos — such as Hyundai's slanted 'H' — torn off or plastered over with tape.

Having come to Sochi fresh off the production line, when the Olympic and Paralympic games end in March, the buses disperse, heading mostly to Moscow where they will service commuter routes between the capital and the surrounding region.

Buses are free if you have a ticket to a sporting event that day.

In the brand new Transportation and Logistics Center, controllers watch giant screens to monitor whether crowds are growing too big at bus stops, redirecting traffic in the event of holdups caused by any fender-benders.

The extra manpower needed to staff the Olympic transport operation was brought in from three different directions, in addition to Sochi. State-owned bus operators from Moscow and St. Petersburg — the country's prime tourist destinations — sent teams, as did a private bus operator from Kazan, the city that hosted the Universiade student games last year.

Here's a look at three employees helping haul tens of thousands of fans around Sochi and to its Olympic facilities.

- Alexander Vitkovsky, chief of the Transportation and Logistics Center, came to Sochi from St. Petersburg. There, he ran bus services at tour firm Arktur Travel, serving floods of passengers disembarking from the giant cruise ships docking in the city. When ships were in dock, he would oversee 400 buses to 500 buses per day. Now, he is in charge of 963 Olympic buses. When the Games end, he plans to return to St. Petersburg and take up his old job.

- Nikolai Alipov, who wears a black suit and tie while driving his 53-seater Golaz, came to Sochi from Ozyory, a small town in the Moscow region. He works for Mostransavto, a state-owned bus company, shuttling commuters back and forth from Ozyory to the capital, and occasionally served bus tours to Sochi and St. Petersburg. Called upon by the Olympics organizers to contribute drivers to the Olympic effort, Mostransavto nominated Alipov for his reliability. In Sochi, his bus is assigned both to a regular route and to the Finnish Hockey

team, which gave Russia a 3-1 hammering Wednesday, knocking the host nation's team out of the competition.

“They are very quiet people, and very disciplined,” he said, with a weak shine emanating from his gold tooth. “The whole team can board a bus in just one minute.”

Alipov is going back home after the Olympics.

- Vyacheslav Bauer, deputy director of the passenger transportation department at the Olympic Games Transportation Directorate, is in a minority among those at work on the operation — he is a Sochi resident. He used to work for Sochi Avtotrans, the city-owned bus operator, as a deputy director managing the fleet of buses. He was uncertain about going back to the company after the Games. Helping the country's Olympic effort will look good on his resume, and might propel him to higher places, he said.

“Time will tell,” he said. “It is a big experience.”

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