

# Sochi Notebook: Inside the Team U.S.A. House

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In front of the Old Believers cemetery in the Sochi Olympic Park, there is a little piece of America.

In what looks from the outside like a small wooden pavilion, there turns out to be a vast 2,400-square-meter space with multiple bars, restaurants, a Ralph Lauren store and a courtyard in the middle. This is the Team U.S.A. House.

The building is open only to athletes, members of the U.S. Olympic Committee delegation, their relatives and friends — although on Valentine's Day its management made an exception and allowed President Vladimir Putin to pay a visit.

Putin sipped some wine, but he could have had much more. The house's chef serves fine grilled meat, boiled sprats, and French fries, among many other treats. Granola bars on offer have been imported from the U.S.

The design of the space is minimalist, with only flatscreen televisions adorning the wooden walls. Various Olympic events are broadcast nonstop, creating a constant soundtrack of American NBC television commentators in the background.

On Wednesday evening, there was a big party in the U.S.A. house. The U.S. hockey team was winning its quarterfinal match against the Czech Republic and the mood was jubilant, with Budweiser beer, white table wine and Tsarskaya vodka flowing like water.

"You Russians must be proud of what you have achieved here," said Jeff McNulty, a supplier of lighting equipment for Olympic venues, while watching the hockey match and eating a cake and drinking beer.

"No other country has been like that — in seven years you have built more than the Chinese did in Beijing," he said.

McNulty has spent almost two years in Sochi, and he said his job was no walk in the park.

"What I usually start doing six months before the Games, here I started two months before," he said.

When asked about alleged corruption in Olympics preparations, which has become one of the recurrent themes in news coverage about the Games, he said: "Everything was done above board. I was involved in many Olympics and this was one of the cleanest ones."

Inside the U.S. House, there was no shortage of praise for the Sochi Olympics. Visitors lauded the transportation system, new venues and security. They said they liked that there was a small American world in the middle of Sochi, with no Oreo cookies or chicken wings but with a pleasant and relaxing atmosphere.

"Safety was a big concern for me because of the press, but once I arrived it all went away," said Bill Bowman, who came from California to support his daughter, freestyle skier Maddie Bowman.

"Russians are good people and they did a good job on this Olympics. Politics is absolutely irrelevant in this," he said.

Sochi is the first Russian town Bowman has visited, but many other athlete families went to see Moscow before the Olympics.

"They went to see ballet and — what it is called — Red Square," Bowman said.

The party reached its climax after the hockey game ended. The crowd toasted and the venue began to resemble a pulsating nightclub.

"Have you been to the Canadian House next door?" said a visitor. "It is strange and cold down there!" he said to a group of friends.

Outside, swarms of U.S., Canadian and Russian fans made their way from the two ice domes across the park to the railway and bus stations. The Americans and Canadians were trying to cheer up the Russians, who had been knocked out of the men's hockey tournament

by Finland earlier in the day.

In front of the Olympic rings, some of them exchanged flags — Americans with Russians and Russians with Americans — but the Russians showed no sign of relief from their team's defeat.

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