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Sochi Notebook: Russian Fans Marvel at New Facilities

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Spectators at the Roza Khutor alpine center on Wednesday. (Yekaterina Kravtsova for MT)

SOCHI — Even with the tens of thousands of sports fans who have come to Sochi for the Winter Games from around the world, Russian visitors predominate at the Olympics.

But many of them say they are more interested in admiring the newly built athletic facilities than in cheering on their national team — and some admit to being rather poorly informed about the Russian competitors.

On Wednesday morning at the Roza Khutor alpine center, the stands were full of spectators for the giant ski slalom. The main hopeful for the gold medal was U.S. skier Ted Ligety, who eventually won the race, but most of the flags carried by fans were Russian.

"This is our country and we are ready to go to any competitions," said Irina Merkulova, 46, an accountant from Sochi, while standing in the grandstand with a Russian flag painted

on her face. She said she didn't know whether Russian athletes would be taking part in the race or not.

"We aren't supporting any team in particular — we came to watch sports that we've never seen live before," she said.

Merlukova said her family had bought tickets six months before the Olympics and said the main purpose was to see Roza Khutor. "We bought tickets to the events to see all the sports facilities, because without a ticket you can't get in," said her daughter, Yekaterina, 26, who works as a lawyer in Moscow.

Russian skiers were welcomed by enthusiastic cheers from the stands when they appeared on the hill, but the Merkulovs' nonchalance toward the Russian athletes seemed to be shared by other visitors.

"I came just to see the Roza Khutor alpine center," said Sergei Zhdan, 49, a businessman from Omsk, while holding a huge Russian flag. He didn't know whether Russian skiers would be taking part in the race either.

"Our athletes are not participating in curling, but we're going there anyway to see the curling center," he said.

Irina Tsybina, 60, an official at the Labor Ministry who was dressed in an outfit made out of a Russian flag, said that she knew that Russian skiers would be in the race but that when she was buying tickets a year before the start of the Games, she didn't know which athletes would be competing in the event.



Labor Ministry official Irina Tsybina at the Roza Khutor alpine center. (Yekaterina Kravtsova)

"We go to many of the events to support everyone, and we like Roza Khutor, but we'd like

the weather to be better," she said.

Most of the visitors who were at Roza Khutor for the first time said they were satisfied with it and would like to try skiing there themselves. "The nature here is magnificent in itself, but all the sports facilities fit here so well, making it even better," said Yekaterina Merkulova.

Roza Khutor will be opened to visitors in late March, after the conclusion of the Paralympic Games.

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