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Tourism Council Tells Sochi to Shape Up

By The Moscow Times

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The Russian International Olympic University, surrounded by palm trees, is one of Sochi's many brand new buildings. **M. Stulov / Vedomosti**

Despite the tens of millions of dollars poured into the spectacle of the Sochi Winter Olympics, some in the tourism industry say that problems at the Black Sea resort's hotels may stop Russia from capitalizing on new tourism infrastructure.

"There is no point hosting a prestige event, at a cost of $50 billion, if the standard of hotels and ease of travel around the country isn't in step," David Scowsill, president of the World Travel and Tourism Council said in a statement.

Many Western journalists criticized the accommodations in Sochi in the run-up to the Olympics' opening ceremony on Feb. 7, complaining of discolored water and unfinished hotel rooms on their Twitter accounts.

"Some of the feedback has been that hotels have not been fully ready, hotel rates have been steep and there have been problems with services such as Internet access. They need to get

the product right, going forward," Scowsill said.

The Russian government hopes that Sochi will become a popular tourist destination after the Olympics, and that it will ultimately be able to compete with Russians' favored vacation spots, like beaches in Turkey.

Though new infrastructure in Sochi will be maintained with government funds through at least 2016, President Vladimir Putin told a meeting of locals after the Games' first weekend that they should not expect additional investment. He also would like Sochi to remain a family destination and said he rejected the possibility of allowing casinos in the area, a proposal that was viewed as generating the most amount of revenue in the shortest time.

The WTTC urged the Russian government to continue promoting tourism as a means of economic stimulation, estimating that the industry constituted 6 percent of the country's economy in 2012 — more than sectors like communication services and automotive and chemical manufacturing. Visitors spent $20.9 billion in Russia in 2013 and tourism generates 4.1 million jobs for Russians, according to WTTC research.

Scowsill also made reference to a possible ease on restrictions for visitors arriving by train that would allow them to stay in Russia for three days without a visa, saying that the country must adopt such policies to capitalize on tourism dollars from the "growing 'middle class' in Asia."

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