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Sochi Ready for Tourists After Games End

By Yekaterina Kravtsova

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People enjoying the sun in Sochi, where the Winter Paralympics will be held next month. **Yekaterina Kravtsova**

With the end of the Olympics, the number of volunteers and Russian sports fans in Sochi has fallen, but crowds of foreign visitors still flooded Sochi on Monday, making the city look like more of an international tourist destination than it was during the Games.

While considerably more people can now be seen in Sochi cafes and streets, the most popular place is still the official Olympics shop, with people having to wait in line for more than an hour just to get inside.

Many foreign visitors decided to stay in the city after the Games to break out of the Olympic bubble they had been living in during the Games. They ventured into central Sochi from Adler, where the Olympic Park is, and Krasnaya Polyana, where the ski resorts are located.

"I decided to stay in Sochi three more days after the ames to explore the city itself," said Kerry James, 41, an investment advisor from Canada.

"All the Olympic events were in clusters, so I did not have a chance to see Sochi before," he said while standing in line for the Olympic store, adding that he had stayed in Adler during the Games.

People who came to work at the Games also got a chance to explore Sochi after the end of the Olympics.

"I have been in Sochi from the beginning of the Games but this is my first time in the city itself. I had not even been to Adler until Saturday night, since my schedule during the ames was very tough. The city looks lovely, I finally got a chance to see it," said Ed Willes, a journalist with Canadian news agency Postmedia News.

Despite the end of the Games, security measures in Sochi remained the same, with the number of police patrolling the streets unchanged. Security at the train station became even tighter and people going to the Olympic facilities still had to pass through a security check.

A security guard at the entrance to the station said that while during the Games tourists were allowed to take all liquids on board trains, now only one bottle of water was allowed. The measure came from an official order, he said.

During the Games, 3.5 million passengers were carried by Russian Railways in the greater Sochi area with the use of 46 trains.

Perhaps in a sign that organizers and officials had been counting on a tourism boost immediately after the Games, Monday was the last day when trains were free of charge for Sochi visitors.

On Tuesday, people will be required to purchase tickets. During the Paralympics, the trains will be free of charge again, but in the meantime a train ticket from Sochi to the Olympic Park will cost 56 rubles ($1.60).

All the Olympic signs and advertisements in Sochi started to receive a makeover on Monday, with Olympic symbols being switched out for Paralympic ones. Paralympic athletes and visitors began arriving in the city, and the special equipment installed for them was being put into operation.

Alyona Nazarova, an archer in a wheelchair who came to Sochi to support Russia's Paralympic team and take part in the Paralympic torch relay ceremony on March 6, said she planned to stay in the Olympic village during the Games. She came to the city because she had free time before the start of the competition.

"The city is very accessible; I am satisfied with the organization," she said. "I came to Sochi just to wander around, to see the ocean, because I have never seen the sea or Sochi before."

Unlike Sochi, the Olympic Park was closed for visitors on Monday.

Inside the Park, President Vladimir Putin was busy congratulating Russian athletes on their victories and impressive gold medal count, awarding them with state decorations for their feats.

Speaking in the Park, Putin thanked the athletes for inspiring and unifying Russians.

"The results of our national team in Sochi show that the difficult period in the history of Russian sports is over and that the investments into winter sports were not futile," he said, referring to criticism over the massive price tag of the Games.

In earlier interviews, Putin said one of the main reasons for the $50 billion investment into Sochi infrastructure was to create necessary training infrastructure for Russian athletes, who were often forced to train abroad because of a lack of such infrastructure.

During his speech, Putin mentioned all medalists by name and cited their specific achievements. He also praised Prime Minister Dmitry Medvedev and Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak for their contribution to the Sochi project.

"IOC President Thomas Bach already spoke about our country's openness, about its new face. There is nothing new here for us, we know who we are," he said.

Putin awarded the athletes, Korean-born short track speed skating athlete Viktor Ahn and U.S.-born snowboarder Vic Wild among them, with state decorations of various ranks.

In return, the athletes thanked Putin for "the festivities that he created."

Putin then posed for a picture with the athletes and other government members in front of the Olympic rings inside the already deserted Olympic Park.

The Park will be closed for visitors until the beginning of the Paralympic Games on March 7, and only people with official accreditation were allowed to enter on Monday. For some visitors, the closure of the Olympic Park was a surprise.

"I decided to stay in Sochi a little bit longer just to visit the Olympic Park after the Games. I hoped there would be some activities for tourists today or maybe some athletes would still be there," said Lidya Grazhdankina, 68, a pensioner who travelled to Sochi from Anapa.

"It is such a disappointment that it has been closed," she said.

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