

# Sochi Visitors Cherish Olympic Memories

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February 27, 2014



A man silhouetted by the setting sun while fishing in the Black Sea outside the Sochi Olympic Park on Tuesday. **Vadim Ghirda**

SOCHI — For perhaps the first time since the Olympic Park project was conceived and the first stones were laid in 2007, the hub of sports facilities and venues on the Black Sea coast in Sochi looked deserted.

What was once occupied by phalanxes of excavators, road rollers and trucks before the Winter Games, and then by gaggles of visitors from more than 120 countries during the Olympics, on Thursday evening looked vast and empty.

A daylong downpour added to the already grim atmosphere. But the Games left a colorful imprint in people's memories.

"It is sad that the Olympics are over," said Natalya Samochina, who came from the Siberian

city of Omsk.

"That is life. The peak of joy is replaced by the sadness of emptiness," she philosophized in front of the Paralympic stopwatch, which is counting down until the start of the Paralympic Games on March 7.

The motto for the Sochi Olympics was "Hot. Cool. Yours." Samochina said the three feelings she had about the Games were "delight, pride and hope."

Such positive impressions were not widely expected ahead of the Feb. 7 to 23 festival of sport, with headlines in the weeks and months before the Games dominated by reports about corruption and misspending, environmental harm caused by venue construction, mistreatment of migrant workers and a crackdown on LGBT rights.

Last week, members of protest group Pussy Riot attempted to draw attention to these issues by holding multiple demonstrations in Sochi, one of which was broken up by Cossacks who beat members with a whip.

But reviews of the Games by visitors and athletes have been largely positive. Five days after the closing ceremony, many of those who have remained in Sochi are already wistful about their experiences.

In Adler, the town just south of Sochi near which the Olympic Park is located, a new Black Sea embankment runs for many kilometers from the Olympic village all the way to the breakaway Georgian republic of Abkhazia. It was built before the Games to replace the main Sochi embankment, which is clogged with countless shops and bars blasting pop music.

Just as at the Olympic Park, few people could be seen on the new embankment on Thursday evening, but vestiges of the Games were in abundance.

Young volunteers assembled pebbles on the beach to write the names of cities from which they hailed: Stavropol, Yakutsk, Kirov, Novosibirsk, Chelyabinsk and Perm, among many others, all lay on the shore.

"One day the sea will wash them away, but our memories will remain," one volunteer said. She said she could not give her name, since volunteers are forbidden to speak to the press.

The pebbled map of Russia lay almost directly in front of a five-star hotel that was built by former Kabardino-Balkaria republic head Arsen Kanokov, who also built his own villa on the territory of the hotel. Many Russian tycoons were called upon by the state to make large-scale investments in the Sochi area, with the bulk of money provided by state-owned Vneshekonombank.

A bit further south, toward the main Fisht Olympic Stadium, sits a small restaurant that was built in a few days to host a meeting between President Vladimir Putin and International Olympic Committee chair Thomas Bach on Feb. 15. The restaurant was closed and empty Thursday evening.

The village around the embankment had an international feel. Visitors from North America and Europe flocked from one little shop to another looking for libations and familiar food.

In the town of Adler itself, many international visitors said they had decided to stay in the Sochi area for longer since outbound flights had been booked up.

"Many people have stayed because it is hard to get cheap flights," said Anne Murray from Nova Scotia, Canada.

Standing with a group of U.S. and Canadian friends in an Adler shopping mall, she said she had no Canadian clothes anymore because they had all been exchanged for Russian garments.

"In the Olympic Park it took us at least an hour to get to the venue as everyone wanted to have a picture with us and exchange T-shirts," she said.

Murray said she thought the Games would bring Russia a wave of good publicity — one of Putin's primary goals for hosting the event — despite the Pussy Riot protests and damning statements by human rights groups about harms incurred due to the Olympics.

"I think this will be a turning point for the way people see Russia in the West. The Olympics organization was impeccable, people were amazing and the food is healthier — all of that will change Russia's image. Putin should capitalize on this success," she said.

The five rings in front of the Olympic Park and in central Sochi have been replaced with the Paralympic symbol, a set of three swish-like marks called "agitos," a word derived from the Latin verb "to move." As with the rings, Olympic athletes and visitors are gradually being replaced with Paralympics participants.

"I think there will still be a lot of people," said Konstantin Vasilyev, a member of the Russian national Paralympic committee, standing outside in central Sochi.

"We think the Russian team will lead again — they have prepared well," he said, referring to Russia's first-place finish in total medals at the 2010 Paralympics in Vancouver.

Deputy Prime Minister Dmitry Kozak has said that the 500,000 tickets for the Paralympics, which start with an opening ceremony on March 7 and run until March 16, have already sold out.

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Original url:

<https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2014/02/27/sochi-visitors-cherish-olympic-memories-a32557>