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Avalanche Warnings and Red Tape Threaten Sochi's Legacy Ski Resorts

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A skier passing by the Olympic rings at the Krasnaya Polyana ski resort during the 2014 Winter Olympics in Sochi.

KRASNAYA POLYANA —As the most expensive Winter Olympics in history fade into memory, the Kremlin hopes that the ski resorts of Krasnaya Polyana will live on as a lasting legacy.

But unpredictable weather patterns and visa worries threaten to tarnish the development of the area as a major international tourist destination.

In a sign indicative of the problems facing the resorts, Mountain Carousel, the only resort that remained open to guests during the Olympics. was forced to close temporarily because of avalanche concerns shortly before the Games wrapped up.

Gala Plaza Hotel manager Svetlana Yavorskaya said the temporary closure of Mountain Carousel stymied efforts to fill the hotel's many vacant rooms during the interim period

between the Olympics, which ended Feb. 23, and the Paralympics, which open Friday evening.

"This is not the first year that we have had to work under such difficult conditions," she said.

"But," she added, "competition with the other hotels is very high."

Efforts to develop the slopes of Krasnaya Polyana were spearheaded as early as 1986, though construction only got under way in the 2000s after Vladimir Putin won the presidency. The Russian government has expressed hope that the Olympics would bolster the visibility of the ski resorts, drawing international tourism to the region.

Various obstacles have prevented the resorts from taking off right away, including the unstable weather conditions symptomatic of Sochi's location in a subtropical climate zone, the region's remoteness from other major travel hubs, and the relative difficulty faced by international travelers trying to obtain Russian visas.

Interestingly, global warming would have already rendered Sochi ineligible to host the WInter Olympics if Russia had waited several decades to launch its bid, according to a report released in January by researchers from the University of Waterloo, the Management Center Innsbruck, and the Interdisciplinary Center on Climate Change.

Speaking of his plans to keep all Olympic facilities in working order, Krasnodar Governor Alexander Tkachyov anticipated that the legacy of the Games would bring in profits of 10 billion to 15 billion rubles annually. "Many facilities have been built as commercial ventures. Construction costs must be paid off, and the facilities must bring profit to investors," Tkachyov told reporters in February.

Working at a Loss

So far, however, lofty goals for the region's ski slopes have remained largely unrealized. Even Rosa Khutor — owned by billionaire Vladimir Potanin and the largest among Krasnaya Polyana's four resorts — has been operating at a loss since it opened in 2010.

While it can take years for a new venture to become profitable, Potanin has blamed its losses on last-minute construction projects aimed at meeting the demands of the Olympics. Speaking with Vedomosti in September, he said Rosa Khutor has not operated at full capacity since opening because of considerable burdens imposed by Games-related security measures as well as official visits from members of the International Olympic Committee and the Russian government. Potanin has not discounted the option of selling the resort.

Overall, $86 million was spent to construct Rosa Khutor's ski and snowboard facilities and a variety of hotels and other accommodations. Its main developer was established by Potanin's firm Interros in 2003, well before Russia launched its Olympic bid. The 3.4 billion ruble ski and snowboard facilities are expected to serve both as a training center for professional skiers and snowboarders and a recreational area for tourists.

Rosa Khutor features the capacity to artificially manufacture snow, thus creating the possibility of fresh snow for up to six months of each year. It remained closed to visitors

through the bulk of this most recent season, however, because of its role as an Olympic facility.

The view that adverse weather conditions might continue to be a drawback for Krasnaya Polyana's development is not shared by everyone. Oksana Rafalskaya, a representative of Mountain Carousel, noted that efforts are being made to build up the region's summer tourism industry as well.

Sberbank-owned Mountain Carousel could have reason to worry, however. The ski resort is equipped to handle 10,500 visitors daily, but it averaged only half that during the Games.

The other two ski resorts at Krasnaya Polyana are Laura and Alpika Service, both owned by Gazprom.

All the resorts offer tracks with various difficulty levels, from easy to freeriding.

Together, Mountain Carousel's tracks stretch 15 kilometers, but only a few of the easy- and medium-difficulty ones were open during the Olympics. Rosa Khutor has nearly 40 tracks, with the most difficult stretching 3,234 meters. Laura has 16 tracks with a combined length of 15 kilometers. Alpika Service's tracks total 9.5 kilometers.

To access the tracks, visitors need to buy a ski pass for about 1,500 rubles. Krasnaya Polyana's management is considering the possibility of introducing a unified ski pass for all four ski resorts in the future. Additionally, visitors are required to pay for ski and snowboard equipment, which can cost about 2,000 rubles per day.

High Russian Demand

Weather conditions aside, many foreign tourists interviewed by The Moscow Times during the Olympic Games cited visa and travel concerns as among their primary concerns with regional tourism, noting that European and North American ski resorts were generally more accessible.

Russian tourists, on the other hand, strongly favored the area's slopes. Olga Favarizova, a senior executive with Travel.ru, said Krasnaya Polyana was easily the most popular ski resort among Russian vacationers because of its accessibility, low prices, and proximity to Sochi's Black Sea coast.

Ten to 15 clients a day used her website to book Krasnaya Polyana hotels in the first two months of this year and Favarizova anticipated that those numbers would continue to soar — though likely only among Russian travelers. "The Olympics were the busiest period, of course, but the Krasnaya Polyana hotels are still in demand," she said.

Several requests were for summer accommodations, she said. Her company has not received any complaints about local weather conditions.

Rosa Khutor will not formally reopen its doors to non-Olympic guests until March 22, but Olympic volunteers were allowed a trial run shortly after the closure of the Winter Games. One volunteer, Olga Vershinina, took to the slopes despite an avalanche warning from the Emergency Situations Ministry. She relished the experience.

"It was wet. First it was snowing, and by the evening it started to rain," she said in an interview as she was leaving Rosa Khutor. "But anything is better than nothing."

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