

Sochi Residents Hope Games Improved Russia's Image

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April 14, 2014



Cranes used for building skyscrapers littered Sochi's skyline in the years leading up to the Winter Olympics.

SOCHI — While the 2014 Olympic Winter Games were a temporary celebration for many tourists and visitors to Sochi, for local residents they had a much more long-lasting impact.

The Games transformed the face of city of 450,000 from a disparate collection of Soviet-era sanatoria into a modern resort with glitzy high-rise hotels, apartment blocks, luxury alpine ski villages and gleaming sports venues.

But some residents wish the transformation had never happened.

Not all Sochi residents benefited from the Olympic construction boom, but some

people's lives have changed
for the better.

"These Games did not give us anything good, only pain," said Maria Yesaulova, 63, walking along the fence of the Olympic Park.

Yesaulova said she had lived in Sochi for 47 years, but only recently came to get a glimpse of the Olympic venues. Before that, she resented the Games so much that she could not bring herself to visit the venues.

"I cannot talk to you [about this] without tears in my eyes," she said, crying. "I could not even watch the Olympics," she said, looking at the park.

For five years, Yesaulova had been trying to register ownership rights on her 12-square-meter room in central Sochi, she said. The local government dilly-dallied and did everything possible to prevent this from happening, she said. After the Games, Yesaulova's request was rejected. According to her, the government deliberately did not issue ownership rights because it wanted to seize the land on the shore of the Black Sea without having to deal with much legal hassle in the future.

A request was sent to the Sochi city administration to comment on Yesaulova's charges, but no response has been received.

Multiple high-rise skyscrapers have been built around Yesaulova's old, dilapidated two-story building, and most of the apartments are owned by government officials from Moscow, St. Petersburg and oil-extraction regions in Russia's western Siberia, according to Sochi real estate agents.

"Oligarchs have come and built these skyscrapers, while we live in slums in the middle!" Yesaulova exclaimed.

Yesaulova said she opposed the local government, calling Sochi Mayor Anatoly Pakhomov "a fascist."

Now that the Olympic Park is closed for further renovation, Yesaulova could not see the big ice hockey, figure skating and other venues. Instead, we walked across the Nekrasovka village, which was built for families that had to be resettled to make space for the Olympic venues.

The village resembles an affluent suburban neighborhood that you might find in the west of Moscow, with the buildings made of bricks rather than plywood.

Klavdiya Petukhova, 73, has lived in the area for 53 years. Today, her little wooden house with a garden is surrounded by the new construction. Standing in the middle of Nekrasovka, she looked amazed, as if in shock at how quickly most of the new redbrick houses and yellow hotels appeared in the last three years.

"My life was changed by the Olympics, we used to have gardens here, bearing our own fruit," said Petukhova, who worked at the local collective Rossia farm. "Now it is all gone," she said.

While the main Sochi embankment is a showcase for Russia's upper-middle class, where many people from all over the country come to put their status on display, it also hosts some of the less advantaged residents of Sochi.

"I sit and fish here since there is nothing else for me to do. Nobody will hire me," said Nikolai Petukhov, 53, sitting on one of Sochi's many breakwater piers.

A former taxi driver, Petukhov said that in the wake of the Olympics, his driving license was suspended on false charges by the city government as part of a campaign to harass local drivers.

"I have been driving around this city for more than 30 years and know it as well as my five fingers, but they put temporary signs turning many streets into one-way ones," he said, gesturing in frustration. Petukhov said the signs were deliberately hidden in order to make drivers violate the rules without realizing they were doing so.

Many people in the Olympic Park area were concerned that their income would deteriorate as more wealthy tourists came to Sochi. For years, many of them relied on middle-class tourists from neighboring regions who stayed in their houses during the summer.

"Tourists do not stay with us anymore; they want better service now and those who used to come can no longer afford it," Petukhova said, pointing to the surrounding hotels, some of them small, and some huge. Azimut Hotel Sochi has almost 3,600 rooms, making it one of the largest in Europe.

"Everything that was built here will serve the rich, not us," Petukhova said.

Up in the mountains, the mood seemed more temperate. In the little village of Estosadok, founded by Estonian families in 1886, ski season is still under way, so there are still many tourists.

While Estosadok was previously a town of bee farms and pear gardens, the Olympics has turned it into a large-scale alpine resort. Today, the area's four resorts can handle up to 30,000 skiers each day, with 9,000 hotel rooms and multiple guesthouses to host them.

"It has become much better for us financially, we used to have many workers and now we also have more skiers," said Galina, 64, who has lived in Estosadok for 40 years. She refused to give her last name due to privacy concerns.

"The gardens were cut down and there are no bee farms anymore, so the place has changed. But we need the change for further development," Galina said while standing in front of one of the guesthouses.

Her husband was born here in an Estonian family, but Galina herself came with her parents from the Stavropol region to work at a local timber factory that has since closed.

Last Monday, the ski resorts were still working, and Galina's son was busy ploughing the snow at one of them. The Olympics has given him a secure job and opportunities for his children as well, she said.

Local children all had positive things to say about the Olympics. Many students at Gymnasium No. 16 in the Bytkha neighborhood of central Sochi participated in the Olympic closing ceremony, dressing up as flowers for the spectacle. Mark Kolomoyets, 16, danced in the War and Peace segment of the opening.

"My life completely changed after the Games. Now I want to study English and go abroad to see the world," he said.

Manana Peshkova, 50, the school's director, took time off work during the Olympics to work as a volunteer.

"My life has been divided into before and after the Olympics. I felt that I was participating in history, which was the most inspiring feeling imaginable," Peshkova said, sitting in her modest office.

Another student covered the Olympics for her school newspaper and said the experience was life-changing.

"I feel pride and a sense of responsibility for my country," said Liza Polyantseva, 14. "We became better after the Olympics. For instance, everybody now says that Russia wants to invade Ukraine, but the truth is that we want to help Ukraine, and we would never fight with the Ukrainians," she said.

Everybody in the school said they were upset by what they called biased international media coverage of the Games, but they were glad to see that afterwards, most visitors had their perceptions of Russia changed.

"We are much better than what people in the West think of us," said Peshkova, a native of Abkhazia.

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