

The Price of One Day in Russia's Summer Capital

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The Sochi Olympics countdown clock on Red Square showing only 25 days and seven hours left until the games. **Igor Tabakov**

SOCHI — Standing on Sochi's Kurortny Prospekt, the city's main avenue, Sochi's status as the Nice of Russia is immediately clear; it is not only the site of the upcoming Winter Olympics, but also a place for national celebrities to see and be seen.

It is perhaps due to this reputation for prestige and luxury that many Russians have been skeptical about coming to Sochi, a place often thought to be overpriced and lacking in terms of service.

With the Winter Olympic Games only 25 days away, these fears have only worsened, as prices have historically soared during Olympics to meet the nearly unlimited demand from visitors.

In order to avoid such prohibitive prices, the Russian government has issued a decree freezing

prices for basic services, such as transportation and dry cleaning.

The Moscow Times sent a reporter to Sochi to calculate an average daily budget, which amounted to about 3,400 rubles.

The government price freeze, which came into effect on Jan. 7, applies to train and air fares to and from all railway stations and airports in the Krasnodar region, in addition to dry cleaning services.

A similar price freeze was ordered earlier for hotels in the area.

Aeroflot has introduced special Olympic fares for roundtrip tickets to Sochi standing at 5,000 rubles (\$150) during the Olympic period. But most of the cheap tickets quickly sold out, leaving travelers with only business-class fares available — which can reach tens of thousands of rubles.

Several Sochi dry cleaners learned about the price freeze only from The Moscow Times.

"We did not receive any notices regarding this issue," said Vitaly Belarodsky, technical director of the Premium dry cleaning chain.

The owner of another dry cleaner got anxious when asked about prices and refused to give his last name, but his employees said that everybody knows him just as Telman.

"I know nothing about it, but if you come here we can make a deal [for a cheaper price]," he said over the phone, his voice noticeably trembling.

During my first time in Sochi, I venture out to see what prices are like in the city's cafes and discover how Russia's Olympic and soon-to-be summer capital has been turned into something international and cosmopolitan.

I start out on Kurortny Prospekt, the center of gravity for Sochi's restaurants, cafes, bars, and President Vladimir Putin, who takes this road to get to his Bocharov Ruchei residence from the airport.

As I saw for myself, you can also find Sochi's Mayor Anatoly Pakhomov eating shashlik with his grandchild here, along with groups of middle-aged men sipping coffee in Mediterranean-looking verandas.

In the run-up to the Games, the city has gone all out in trying to resemble a typical seaside town in Italy; the mayor even ordered that all roofs be painted dark red.

I have breakfast at a Turkish place, Guzel, meaning beautiful in Turkish, a restaurant I find hidden in one of the many hotels that has sprouted up in Sochi, as if the land were fertilized with a special Olympic stimulant.

Inside you find a typically sedate Eastern-style cafeteria with groups of middle-aged men slowly drinking tea while watching a football match of the Turkish Super Lig.

The average kebab with tea and baklava were delivered quickly for a total price of 400 rubles

(\$12) with a clear premium for Mediterranean flavor.

After a short stroll on the embankment, flanked by a multitude of seashore bars with pulsating music, I decide to once again rely on advice from the locals and go to the Belye Nochi restaurant for lunch. The talk of the town is that Putin is a regular visitor here, probably because of the name, which translates as white nights — the phenomenon that Putin's native St. Petersburg is famous for. Sochi, in contrast, is better-known for its dark mesmerizing sky above the palpitating sea.

Belye Nochi is famous for its khinkali, large Caucasian dumplings, which can be found in great abundance for a very low price of 150 rubles for five of them. With a vegetable salad and coffee, the total bill came out to 300 rubles (\$9) — a price that is likely to be within the budget of most visitors.

Incidentally, despite the city's apparent attempts to exude a worldly flavor for its anticipated guests, Sochi did not always seek international prominence.

Following the Russian Revolution of 1917, Vladimir Lenin, the leader of the nascent Soviet state, sought to turn Sochi into a luxurious resort for the creme de la creme of the new ruling class of proletariat.

Over the course of the next four decades, several palatial-style sanatoria were built on the cliffs of the Western Caucasus, rivaling imperial palaces of the neighboring Crimea. The opulence and grandeur remained the same, but the target audience shifted.

The new government was consciously building a reputation for Sochi, one of an exclusive and expensive resort where people could showcase their dedication to the Soviet state.

Despite the upheavals of the 1990s and the loss of many premium tourists for more exotic resorts in Southeast Asia and Europe, Sochi still boasts an air of prestige. One of Russia's poshest events, the Kinotavr film festival, is held in Sochi's monumental Winter Theater each June.

After a whole day spent exploring central Sochi, I catch a taxi and drive toward the Olympic park in Adler. The route is picturesque, with the sea popping in and out of sight and grand Stalinist sanatoria standing gloomily on the left.

Adler is a separate town but is administratively a part of greater Sochi. This is where you see the pinnacle of Russia's Olympic effort. Six new arenas, including the mammoth Olympic Fisht stadium, stand on the right. We go a bit further up in the mountains, however, to Apsheronsky Dvor cafe, which was recommended as the place where the Olympic Organizing Committee treats its guests.

What was once a modest roadside cafe just a few years ago, today resembles a formidable castle. The place even hosts a special hall for guests of the Russian Railways company.

The price tag here is higher than at other places, but still not excessive, with lamb shashlik, kharcho soup and tea costing a total of 670 rubles (\$21).

Adler is not famous for its nightlife, so I decide to take a new Siemens train back to Sochi

proper. The taxi was 1,300 rubles (\$40) but the train was only 42 rubles, with comparable levels of comfort.

Back in Sochi, I go to Khuan Ivanych bar, said to be the hippest place in town.

After passing moderate "face control," with a girl at the entrance asking where I'm from, I end up in a rectangular hall filled with both Sochi natives and people from all over Russia who came to take part in Olympic construction.

A glass of wine here will cost you 240 rubles, but the atmosphere is fun.

If you want a more chic and posh experience — and to really indulge in the city's reputation for luxury — go to the London Bar, where drinks start at 450 rubles.

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