

Sochi Notebook: Rain or Shine, Putin Takes the Blame

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SOCHI — Terrorism fears ahead of the Winter Olympics have prompted speculation that visitors will face unprecedented security checks and that Sochi essentially will be cut off from the rest of the world with a barbed-wire fence for several weeks.

I decided to find out whether the talk about Sochi was true. It isn't. I have not been stopped and checked once, despite navigating through dozens of police officers while traveling here and spending the past six days in the city.

The trip began at the richly ornate Kazansky Station in Moscow, where the special double-decker Olympics train to Sochi was served from a designated platform guarded by OMON riot police.

Passengers' bags — including mine packed with electronic equipment — were screened at the station entrance. But the procedure didn't differ from that of other major train stations

in Russia. Indeed, the screening checkpoint and police presence did not prevent Pavel Pechenkin, a Russian convert to Islam, from blowing himself up at the entrance to the train station in Volgograd on Dec. 29, killing 18 people.

During the 23-hour trip to Sochi, two police officers sauntered through my train car once, but they did not stop or ask any questions.

The train stopped at several small train stations en route to Sochi. The stations were not as heavily guarded as the Kazansky Station, with no baggage screening devices installed at their entrances. At one of the stations, Goryachiy Kluch, located three hours from Sochi, people boarded the train without any checks.

The Sochi Station, however, has been turned into a fortress, with wire fencing and hundreds of police officers on duty around the clock. People are subject to airport-style security checks when they enter Sochi Station, but for some reason, arriving passengers are not checked at all.

In Sochi itself, some 40,000 police officers have been deployed in a visible effort to beef up security. Officers are visible everywhere on the streets. But no one has stopped me for a document check or to search my bags since my arrival.

Security seems to be in line with President Vladimir Putin's orders. Answering questions of foreign and Russian journalists on Jan. 19, Putin said: "We will try to make sure that security measures do not seem an imposition, are not too conspicuous, and do not put pressure on the athletes taking part in the Olympic Games and the guests and journalists present there."

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