

Fans Shun Sochi Over Bombs, Bureaucracy, Big Bucks

By [The Moscow Times](#)

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A security guard standing in front of the Olympic Cauldron ahead of the medals ceremony in Sochi on Sunday. **Shamil Zhumatov**

When Sven Kramer wins Olympic gold, he likes to celebrate by communing with the Dutch fans who worship him. Four years ago at the Vancouver Games, 3,000 packed a cavernous hall and went wild when Kramer appeared.

At the Sochi Olympics, Kramer again partied with his flock after leading a Dutch sweep of medals in the 5,000 meters. But what was a roiling sea of people cheering him in Vancouver shrank to little more than a pond — although still a very happy and noisy pond — in Sochi.

Although these are early days at Russia's first Winter Games, indications are that some would-be spectators from overseas have stayed home, seemingly scared off by terrorist bombings, pervasive security, knotty Russian bureaucracy and the big bucks needed to reach President Vladimir Putin's winter wonderland on the Black Sea coast and in the Caucasus

mountains.

Some Olympic venues have a very Russian feel. Figure-skating crowds, for example, seem to be almost exclusively Russian. On the first evening of competition, even four women waving a red, white and blue tricolor for France's skating team turned out to be Russians from Moscow. Many foreigners who have made it to Sochi fall into three camps: experienced world travelers who are not easily spooked; die-hard Olympic regulars who would travel to any host city; or corporate types and wealthier tourists who delegate travel logistics to others.

Spunky Japanese retiree Mitsuko Taguchi, 80, is in the first group. Having previously traveled to hotspots Afghanistan and Pakistan, she was unfazed by terror threats targeting the games.

But the expense of traveling to Sochi from the southern Japanese island of Kyushu made her wince. Taguchi said she knew of at least five other people who applied to her travel agent, but only one of them ended up joining her.

Including hotel, flights and a \$2,000 ticket to the opening ceremony and others for figure skating, she calculated the cost of her 5-night stay in Sochi at \$18,000. Taguchi said that is four times what she spent at the 2012 London Games, where she found a cheap bed and breakfast, traveled on public transport and bought black-market tickets.

"Very expensive here. I was surprised," she said after cheering on Japanese teenage skating phenom Yuzuru Hanyu. To shave expenses, Jan van Meer and his three friends — down from the group of 10 he traveled with to Vancouver — flew via Istanbul to Krasnodar, the regional capital, rather than direct to Sochi. Unfortunately for them, their plane was made to circle for an hour over Istanbul while Turkish authorities dealt with a hijack attempt by a Ukrainian who tried to force his flight to divert to Sochi.

The delay caused Van Meer's group to miss their Krasnodar to Sochi train. Once in the Olympic city, they waited 30 minutes to collect the special passes spectators need as well as tickets to get through security. The first four races at the speedskating arena were already finished when the party arrived, faces haggard but nevertheless radiant in the colors of Dutch fans everywhere: bright orange. They quickly cracked open beers.

"A lot of friends of mine, they did not come," said Van Meer, who shelled out the euro equivalent of nearly \$7,000, about what he spent in Vancouver, for 10 days at his fifth Winter Games.

"A few did not want to come because it was too expensive. Others were worried about the bombers."

Robert Visser said his wife pulled out after the Volgograd bombings, even though she could have traveled for free like him, courtesy of the auto manufacturer whose cars he sells in the Netherlands.

"A lot of people were invited. They canceled," he said. Casting a glance at his 20 or so travel companions, all dressed like him in orange, he added: "These are the die-hards."

Others said they wrestled with Russian paperwork, visas and the spectator pass.

"The process took a bit of time. I had to have confirmed accommodation and I had to have Olympic tickets, and then I had to apply for a visa," said Magali Robert of Calgary, Alberta, whose 18-year-old daughter is a ski jump forerunner — sent down the hill to test conditions before Olympians compete.

"Then it was a question of getting the flights. They are very expensive from Canada, and it is not easy to get here. That was probably the biggest stumbling block for a lot of people."

Sochi organizers said about 40,000 people attended events on Day 1, but 4,000 others who had tickets did not turn up. Spokeswoman Alexandra Kosterina said Russians tend to cut things close.

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