

# 2014 Winter Games not looking good in Russia

By Ryan Dunfee, Powder

When Mark Meadows first visited Sochi, Russia, in 2009, his first impression was how much work there was left to do.

“That was the first thing that hit you,” said Meadows, the vice president of Torrent Engineering, the company responsible for much of the snowmaking infrastructure for the Vancouver, Sochi, and the future Korean Winter Olympics. “You sat there and said, ‘OK, what’s the date? There’s a ton of stuff to be done.’”

The airport baggage claim looked more like a conveyor belt in a warehouse, and the entire airport held maybe 100 people.



Sochi in mid-February.

As he headed up the one-lane road into the Caucasus Mountains, he passed a couple of ski shops, but ski culture in this part of Russia was not an established phenomenon. The small village of Rhosa Khutor had one small ski area with some ageing fixed-grip chairs, and one twenty-room family-run hotel. The only evidence of a future Olympic venue were a few muddy roads leading up to an enormous mountain, and a remote camp of grizzled men living in shipping containers and tents, who were responsible for cutting the trails. They’d started only six months prior. Road access and telephones had only come into the valley 20 years prior.

While the Soviet Union was a force to be reckoned with at any Winter Games during the Cold War, after it collapsed in 1991, Armenia, Georgia, and Azerbaijan broke away and became

independent countries, taking the Soviets' best winter training facilities with them. So Russia has had to build its snowsports facilities for Sochi more or less from scratch. And Vladimir Putin – The Bear – is evidently using every ounce of his position, his dogged enthusiasm for sport, and undoubtedly many of his state cronies and oligarch friends, to muscle the 2013 Sochi Games forward to completion.

Now, 60,000 workers pound away 24/7 both in the palm tree-lined city of Sochi and in the “mountain cluster” where all the alpine and Nordic events, along with the luge and bobsled, are taking place. A new international airport has been built next to the quiet regional one that Mark flew into five years ago, as have countless high rises. The third-largest gas plant in the world has just been finished, with seven others on the way, to power both the construction and the Games. Twenty kilometers of high-voltage lines, along with high-speed light rail passing through 22 new tunnels, now march up the valley where only the tiny one-way meandered before.

Up in Rhosa Khutor, where the mom-and-pop hotel had been the only show in town, 10 brand-new hotels and 1,600 rooms have opened, with some of the foundations for the buildings having only been poured in October. These look down on a river whose course is being moved by bulldozers. Where they had been no ski area, Doppelmayr gondolas and high-speed six packs climb 5,700 vertical feet to the summit, off of which lies alpine terrain to rival Jackson Hole. Putin is punching through the most sensational development plan of any Winter Olympic Games in history, as an event that's usually held in known ski destinations – Whistler, Salt Lake City, Nagano – is being held in a locale more famous as a summer beach retreat in one of the world's most controversial emerging powers.

But, as in Beijing, the coming out party is not coming together without controversy. Sochi is the warmest venue in Winter Olympic history. Despite the nearly 6K of vertical at Rhosa Khutor, leadership decided to place the halfpipe,

slopestyle, aerials, and moguls venue at the bottom, where a climate change report revealed that average February temperatures are around 35 degrees Fahrenheit.

While the run-up to the Beijing Olympics involved a lot of talk about whether the city's notoriously noxious air would be clean enough for elite competitors, at Sochi the concern is whether or not there will be enough snow. The Chinese forced factories to close so air quality would be high enough; the Russians say they can bully the snow into existence regardless of temps via their "Hot Snow" program. The new snowmaking system is reportedly able to make snow at temperatures up to 60 degrees, while a reservoir near the alpine venues holds frozen snow collected from past seasons. In a no-holds-barred, hey-didn't-we-say-this-was-a-green-games approach, chemical additives are at hand to make the snow bond better, and the Ministry of Defense in Moscow even has its hand in cloud-seeding to ensure any rain might fall as snow.

Despite all this, halfpipe skiers at last week's Olympic test event were competing in the rain in a pipe slushed out by 59-degree temps. Nearby, a bare slopestyle venue sat layered with snow-saving tarps, that test event cancelled due to a lack of snow. Many of the snowboarders were saying it was Vancouver all over again.

Human rights groups have cried foul that many of the migrant workers building Sochi's stadiums and facilities have been abused as contractors push to meet construction deadlines. A heavy security presence alludes to the tension, both recent and past, that beleaguers the area. Almost directly off the back of Rhosa Khutor sits Abkazia, the disputed territory that was the subject of the 2008 war between Russia and Georgia. Abkazia's nominal independence is supported heavily by Russia and recognized by only five other countries. Georgia still considers the area a part of its territory.

Sochi itself was once the capital of the Circassians, a North

Caucasian ethnic group that was expelled from the area when the Russians conquered the Caucasus in 1864. They still maintain that a genocide of their people has gone unrecognized, and a lobbyist for the group's 3.7 million-strong international diaspora wants athletes to know that they "will be skiing on the bones of our relatives."

Sports Illustrated's Alex Wolff recently wrote: "Putin is interested in much more than being a gracious and modern host. To maximize the nationalist passions on which his United Russia Party plays, The Bear must win." Only time will tell if the potential fissures in Putin's iron plan for Sochi materialize into anything more serious than a slushy halfpipe.