

For decades Russia did not have any reasonable sized ski resorts, and those that it did have were in the frozen Siberian wastes where temperatures can fall to around minus 50 degrees centigrade. Not anywhere warm-blooded Western skiers would want to go.

Text: Tony Gearing

All that changed with the Winter Olympics in 2014. From the late noughties Putin ordered the building of a massive modern ski resort in a valley above the Black Sea resort of Sochi. And he and his oligarch mates achieved it. The result is an ultra-modern ski resort on three levels.

Furthest from the slopes is the Red Valley, home to a massive casino and I suspect more gamblers than skiers as you would have to get transport to the slopes from here. Next is Rosa Khutor (drop the K and pronounce it Rosa Hooter) on the banks of the Mzymta or Crazy river where the many hotels look like they are from fairytales. Even the multi-storey car parks have Rapunzel-like towers.

From here you would get a gondola up the valley to the Olympic Village where I was staying. The hotels here are less fairytale, but still ultra modern and built with top athletes in mind. I have never seen so many massage rooms, presumably to work on lactic-choked muscles after the downhill. I only skied parts of the men's and women's competition slopes and they were dramatically black and red. The maximum gradient is 84% (40 degrees) at the top of the course.

Since the athletes have left, the Olympic Village hotels have adjusted well to hosting tourists, albeit the vast majority of them so far are other Russians. Showing typical Russian hospitality there must have been 100 different foods on offer at breakfast, and you ate as many as you wanted.

Several of the Olympic village hotels were ski-in-ski-out, but... The four-man chair that



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A Russian ski resort experts will want on their bucket list

# Rosa Khutor



took us over the nursery slopes to the gondola was one of the slowest I have ever been on. I made friends with many Russians who could speak English (my Russian is limited to ordering beer) during this seven-minute dawdle.

Our twin room faced down the valley. Every evening that the sky was clear the sunset slowly filled the valley in a golden-red-and-yellow glow. Beautiful!

The skies had been clear over Rosa Khutor for some time. There had been no snowfall for a month and the piste machines were pushing artificial snow around the slopes that remained open. About half of the 102km of runs were shut, and some of the

others had tiny stones peeking through the snow.

Then on the fifth day, the snow finally fell, and some had a great time playing in the lightest powder up to their waists. It is said this is because the resort is only 40 minutes from the sea. As visibility was so poor, I preferred to take the day off and visit Sochi, where back in the USSR Soviet citizens were rewarded with holidays.

I didn't realise professions were kept together – or should that be away from each other? – in hotels specifically for their profession. Murmansk fishermen stayed at the Fishermen form the North Hotel; Teachers stayed at The Knowledge Hotel.

There are still shades of that paranoia today. The Olympic Village was the first time I have ever been asked to get off a transfer bus and go through airport-like security with my fellow passengers while our bags were sniffed by guard dogs. Similarly if you travelled down to the main village you had to go through another security check before taking the gondola back up to the Olympic Village, although this came across as a lot more lax.

On our last day the new snow had been pisted and we were able to ski slopes that had been closed to us the rest of the week. Unfortunately skiing-starved Russians had heard about the new snow and there was soon an hour-long queue to get up the main gondola to the 2500-metre peak and ski back down a variety of routes to the the Olympic village at 1200 metres.

Don't get me wrong. I enjoyed skiing in an Olympic resort. Of course, you can say this about many ski resorts in Europe. But, while many in Austria, France etc have been enhanced to meet Olympic standards, none have been wholly built from scratch in recent years.

As Rosa Khutor has been built in an environmentally conscious age it claims to be sustainable. The thing I noticed was a higher proportion of ski tracks and narrow runs to wide open pistes than I am used to. I got the impression the resort is trying to cut down fewer trees.



◀ Boobel-Woohel Carnival ends the season

▶ Rosa Khutor suits best for experts

A novel experience was a tunnel decorated with sea mammals. As you poled through whale singing is played to you. Not really about conservation, but it felt nice.

When the sun is out – which it was for five out of six days – the Caucasus Mountains are stunning. Most days the temperature was neutral but on the last it was minus 10 degrees centigrade. When skiing in Russia – layer up!

With twin rooms for a week starting at about £600 and flights for a few hundred, it is possible to ski in Russia for less than Europe, **EVEN AFTER YOU ADD IN THE COST OF A VISA**. But would I recommend going?

Yes and no. If you are a beginner or even an intermediate, I wouldn't go.

But if you are an advanced skier who wants to ski in different countries then Rosa Khutor is the Russian resort you should put on your bucket list.