

SOCHI, Russia — On the pebbled beaches of the Russian Riviera, sunbathers soak up rays on a warm day under a cloudless sky.

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Boats, Jet-Skis and sailboards pass by on the Black Sea. Lavish flowers — and even date palms — thrive in the sunshine.

And all this in late October.

With that backdrop, and with the northernmost subtropical climate on earth, it's little surprise that **Sochi** (pronounced so-chee) has been chosen to host the Olympics. What is surprising is that it's the Winter Olympics that are coming to town, in 2014.

For the reason why, look beyond the shore: The snow-capped peaks of the western Caucasus Mountains back up to the city, making it an enviable vacation destination all year long.

Stately spa hotels, each with extensive grounds and gardens, sprawl along the main street through town (actually, the only street running the length of town). In Soviet times, party cadres and those who earned an invitation came to Sochi for rest and the full spa treatment.

Many of the spas keep some hint of their past lives in the USSR. There's the Akter, with comedic and tragic masks on its gates; it catered to the actors and actresses of the time. The Dzherzinsky, set apart to the north of downtown, takes its name from "Iron Feliks"

Dzherzinsky, founder of what would become the KGB — no bonus points for guessing who stayed there. Toward the airport, there's the Aeroflot. Back on the main street, the Metallurg is where miners went for a rest.

In fact, the main street is known as Kurortniy Prospekt (or "Health Resort Boulevard").

Sochi's history has everything to do with its healthy climate. The city was founded in 1838, after an army fort was built nearby, and the railroad was built along the mountainous coast, opening the area to the rest of Russia.

Before long, word was out, and the wealthy classes of the tsarist era were building summer places in town. One, a St. Petersburg newspaper baron and horticultural enthusiast, put together Sochi's arboretum as his own private park, complete with Japanese and Chinese gardens and a grotto. Today, the arboretum straddles Kurortniy Prospekt and has cable cars running from its base to its eastern end atop a hill.

Sochi has a number of large parks, and inside, ceremonial plantings are the norm.

In the arboretum, Mayors' Alley is lined with palms planted by the heads of municipal government from Afghanistan to Nebraska. In the nearby botanical gardens, the "friendship tree" has received grafts of a number of types of citrus from people representing 167 countries. And across town, at the Park Riviera, there's a grove of trees planted by everyone from Raul Castro to the astronauts and cosmonauts of 1975's Apollo-Soyuz space mission.

With their neoclassical architecture and favorable locations, the Stalin-era spas remain popular destinations today.

Their successors from the Krushchev and Brezhnev eras aren't faring as well. The Intourist is being rebuilt, and there's talk that the Akter will be pulled down soon — perhaps to be replaced by luxury homes and condominiums. And the Interior Ministry's '60s-era high-rise spa is looking rather dated. Perhaps its days are numbered as well.

When one gets tired of relaxing on the Black Sea beaches, there are a wide variety of activities in Sochi:

Water parks, a permanent circus, theaters, excursions into the mountains, and a good-sized art museum are among the highlights.

There's a waterfront promenade lined with shops and cafés that doesn't feel very different from Atlantic City or Hampton Beach. And, at the ornate sea terminal, there's regular service across the Black Sea to Turkey, as well as short sightseeing trips by boat along the coast.

Good food is also in abundance. Beyond Russian fare, many restaurants and cafés feature Georgian dishes, most prominently shashlik, or barbecue. The Magnolia Hotel has a reasonable — and tasty — Turkish restaurant. Café Dali, downtown, does an excellent gazpacho.

On the street, it's possible to buy freshly squeezed pomegranate and orange juice, both from locally grown fruit.

Accommodation today in Sochi runs the gamut, from five-star hotels, like the Radisson SAS Lazurnaya, to simple rooms in pensioners' apartments. The pensioners gather at the train station, holding placards listing the details.

There's no shortage of options, but most places cost western prices. The rack rate for a standard room at the Radisson is well over \$200 a night; a well-appointed suite at the Hotel Staraya Melnitsa ("Old Mill"), a new facility with a hillside location overlooking the sea, comes in around \$120 a night.

In the past few years, Sochi had seen a bit of a slump. Given more options (and, recently, more money), Russians were increasingly choosing resorts in Turkey and Egypt. Some in town say the Olympic bid has changed that.

The real estate market has gotten a big boost. Property that wasn't selling before is now fetching prices approaching \$1 million. Construction is booming.

And this is just the beginning.

At the stately Sochi Art Museum, most visitors are less interested in the paintings than in scale models of the Olympic venues.

In just over six years, the world's attention will be on two Olympic villages: One along the coast, near the airport and the border with the Republic of Abkhazia, will host all skating events and the press center; the other, in the mountains near the village of Krasnaya Polyana, will be the site of the skiing and alpine events.

The work is under way at Krasnaya Polyana, where helicopters fly cement up the mountains to lay the foundations for the ski jumping and downhill venues. New cable cars stand ready to replace an aging chair lift up the mountain. And a new terminal, nearly completed now, is due to open next summer at Sochi-Adler Airport, replacing a badly outdated facility.

The government recently announced \$7.3 billion in funding, which will include a high-speed rail link between Krasnaya Polyana and the airport. With new stadiums and skiing facilities, the government says it wants to make Sochi a world-class year-round resort.

The Olympic building plans have generated a fair amount of debate. Environmentalists, fearing that the development in the mountains could harm wildlife, have filed suit. Activists say the government's plan to buy up the coastal land for redevelopment will leave some people homeless.

For most, though, landing the Olympics has been a source of enormous pride — and made smiles even wider in this cheerful city.

By BRYAN LANTZ