

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

JH - 12

Russians (and Hanessians) on Holiday

Sea Gull Hotel
Sochi, Krasnador Kray
Russian S.F.S.R., U.S.S.R.
11 August 1959

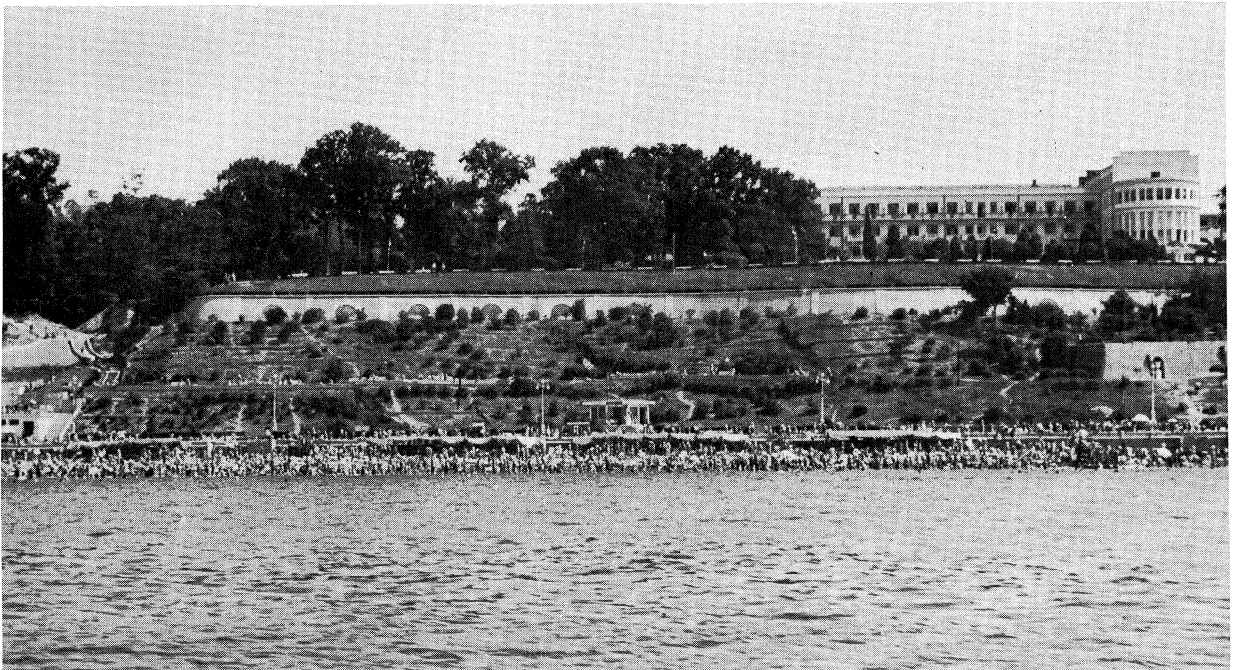
Mr. Walter S. Rogers
Institute of Current World Affairs
366 Madison Avenue
New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Rogers:

Edging the Black Sea and beautifully situated at the foot of the Greater Caucasus Mountains lies the city of Sochi, the largest and most popular beach resort in the Soviet Union. Enjoying a year-round moist sub-tropical climate, this city of 81,000 annually plays host to more than 300,000 "deserving Soviet workers."

At its 48 hotels and sanatoriums as well as numerous rest homes Russians from all parts of the Soviet Union cavort on holiday in much the same way as in any other country. Here we have found relaxed and carefree Russians swimming, sunning themselves, playing volley-ball, attending concerts and just strolling along the many tree-lined streets.

Our hotel is the "Sea Gull," a modern structure high on a hillside overlooking the sea. Most of the rooms have a small private balcony,



Sochi: Public Beach

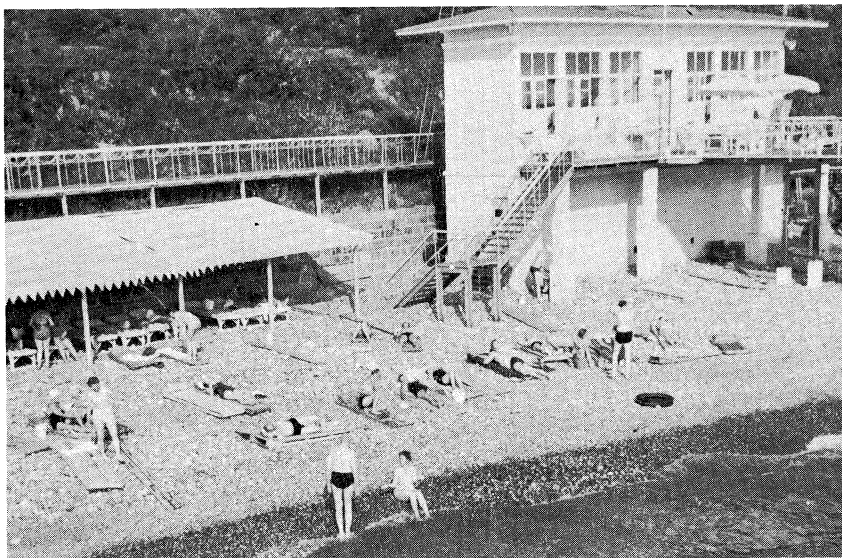


Sea Gull Hotel: East Wing

and are equipped with a shower bath and the usual heavy, dull Soviet furniture. The hotel has extensive gardens, fountains and "walks." Included among the current crop of guests is a large group of Czechs as well as a scattering of Russians and a few western tourists.

The Czechs are a healthy-looking bunch - suntanned, well-dressed and carrying expensive watches and ostentatious cameras. The wives are extremely stylish when compared to their Russian counterparts. They are having quite a gay time, and are constantly whooping it up at the beach, the dining room and at the hotel's volley-ball courts.

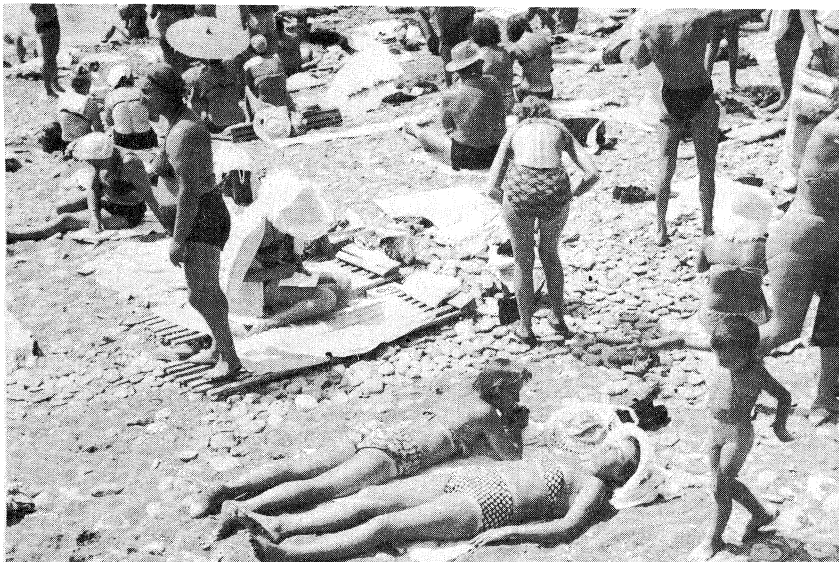
The city, which is of predominantly Russian population (with some Ukrainians and Circassians,) is located administratively within the Krasnador Kray of the Russian S.F.S.R. Although Sochi has been a popular spa for many years, it was not until 1934, when the Soviet Government began a major construction scheme, that the city really blossomed. Most of the sanatoriums, hotels and public buildings have been built since then.



Private Beach: Sea Gull Hotel

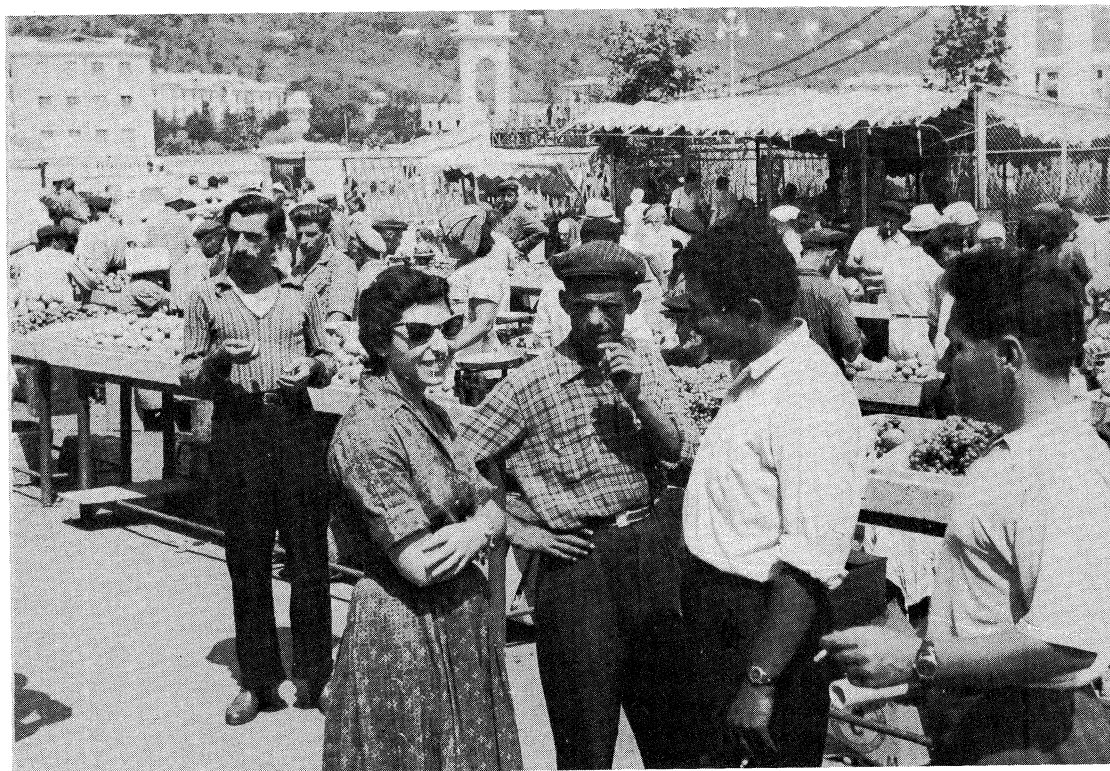


Sochi: The Public Beaches



The main thoroughfare, Stalin Prospect, is a pleasant street set amidst the rich sub-tropical vegetation so prevalent in the city. The Prospect runs parallel to the many beaches and affords access to the public buildings, theatres and the modern port facility constructed in the late 1930's.

With a mean annual temperature of almost 60° F. (about the same as Nice) and a summer average temperature of 77° F. Sochi enjoys a full



Alice Chatting in Armenian with an Azerbaijani University Student on Holiday

bathing season of over six months a year. It is a popular youth holiday center, and one often sees groups of "pioneers" marching along the streets with their red bandanas flying. The city boasts an impressive fruit-canning and jam industry. On the shelves of the busy open-air public market are found many varieties of luscious fruits and vegetables rarely seen in the shops of the northern cities.

We arrived at the new, modern airport yesterday afternoon after a four-hour flight from Armenia via Tbilisi, Georgia. As Sochi airport is situated some 40 km east of the city, we had the opportunity of being driven over the twisting road that intersects the many hills and small mountains amidst the lush flower-covered fields.

After checking in with Intourist at the hotel (an essential item of business for the traveller within the Soviet Union) we immediately took the funicular down the hillside to the hotel's private beach, some 400 feet below. There are several of these tiny railways, each shared by several adjoining hotels or sanatoriums.

The rock-covered beach is a rather narrow affair, stretching for many miles between the mountain foothills and the adjoining Black Sea.

The entire beach area near here is rock-covered, but, oddly enough, we did see many fine but undeveloped sandy beaches along the north-eastern reaches of the Black Sea, over which we flew yesterday. The beach area here consists of a connecting series of pavillions, one for each hotel. Each includes a covered pier, two communal dressing rooms, and both an open and sheltered beach area with small wooden platform on which one can stretch out.

These private beaches are never crowded, and, except for the rocks, afford one a pleasant spot to relax. The water is fine for swimming - clean, slightly salty, and with a good surf. Our greatest amusement has been in watching the Russians and Czechs splashing about in knee-deep water like little children at play.

There seems to be very little serious swimming, no lifeguards and no diving boards - just leisurely relaxation. Everyone appears at the beach with his book and garbed in the national beach costume, which looks exactly like a pair of pyjamas.

The bathing suits are not unlike those in the United States. Two-piece outfits (even some "bikinis") are popular with the women; the men wear boxer style trunks. The colors are subdued, although some of the women's costumes occasionally break out in a demure pink polka dot.

Adjacent to our section is a "ladies" pavillion - filled largely with 200 pound specimens chattering gaily while sunning themselves in various stages of undress. They are indeed a fascinating lot.

By contrast, the public beaches (situated well away from the private ones) are jammed with the not-quite-so-fortunate majority. Here, entire families spend the day sitting in the sun. They come by public transportation from the more modest hotels and rest homes - quite often bringing a picnic lunch. Very few dressing rooms here - the art of changing clothes under a bathrobe is highly advanced.



Sochi: Stalin Prospekt

This morning, for almost the first time in the U.S.S.R., I ran into some Soviet humor. Our guide, Valentin (a Russian schoolteacher on holiday from Rostov) was discussing the Soviet system of granting medals. When describing the "hero" medal given to mothers who have had 10 children,

I asked if there was any equivalent medal for fathers. The entire Intourist staff (we were in their office) was thrown into gales of laughter.

Valentin has been given an eight week holiday at Sochi, but has not been allowed to bring his wife and family (a privilege presumably granted only on special occasions.) He is the most relaxed of any of the guide-interpreters we have had. He has joined us in swimming, for a speedboat ride, and in casual discussions of Dostoevski. The latter came up when we went into a Sochi bookshop to purchase an English-language book. All we found, other than a few translations of Russian authors, was "The Last of the Mohicans!"



Sochi: Street Scene

Last night we took advantage of our first opportunity to attend a concert in the U.S.S.R. During the summer most of the symphony orchestras, ballet and opera companies are on tour away from the principle cities. Here we caught up to the Leningrad Symphony Orchestra.

The concert was held in a rather attractive open-air auditorium, beautifully located in the midst of a small park near the sea. The program, consisting of selections from Shostakovitch, Rimsky - Korsakov, Tschaikovsky and Mozart, was well played under the direction of a conductor impeccably dressed in white tie and tails. The orchestra itself wore an informal costume of short-sleeve white shirts and slacks.

One custom was somewhat disconcerting. After the house lights were turned down, a "narrator" strode out, and, for exactly 28 minutes, spoke at length about the forthcoming program, complete with biographical details of the composers. This performance was again repeated interminably after the intermission - all in the absence of a printed program. Although Soviet audiences are extremely well behaved, this one was obviously not very interested in the speech.

Yours sincerely,

John Hanessian, Jr.
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