

Jet Set navigates huge hospitality effort, expected challenges

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Preparing for the Sochi Games was more challenging for Jet Set Sports than any Olympics since Athens.

The company, which is the official hospitality supplier of Sochi 2014, has run hospitality programs at 17 Olympics. Its founder, Sead Dizdarevic, is accustomed to last-minute preparations. He had a hotel in Vancouver that his staff worked at for 24 straight hours to open in time for guests. But the size and scale of what Jet Set had to do in Sochi was greater than any other Olympics.

Dizdarevic learned on Jan. 27 that three mountain hotels where he had reserved 150 rooms for corporate clients weren't going to be finished in time. He knew he couldn't do anything to get all three done in time, so he and his staff joined the hotel staff to try and finish one of them, the Solis.

"The reason they were late was they were building three hotels simultaneously without sufficient labor," Dizdarevic said. "They were disorganized. They jumped from place to place. We asked them to provide the labor and focus on a single hotel, the Solis, and we finished it in four days."

During the week before the Games, Jet Set's staff installed television lines, internet service, adjusted thermostats, bought food and drinks for the mini-bars, and cleaned the rooms.

A road that was supposed to reach the Solis, which is perched in the middle of a mountain resort, wasn't completed and guests were going to have to take their luggage up a gondola to check in. Instead, Jet Set designed a system to ferry their luggage up and down the mountain.

"These are normal growing pains of (new) hotels," said Alan Dizdarevic, Sead's son and Jet Set's co-CEO. "When you're under a tight timeline, there's not room for growing pains. You have to become an adult overnight."

Jet Set was anticipating such problems at the Sochi Games. The construction effort here was greater than any previous Games. Not only was Sochi building venues for events, it was building more than 22,000 hotel rooms. Jet Set's staff knew some of those wouldn't be completed.

Dizdarevic said they reserved 260 rooms at the Radisson in the established town of Sochi as a backup in case hotels weren't done.

"I was ready to move everybody down," he said. "Tell them it won't be finished. You won't be in the mountains. You will be in the city."

But the work they did on the Solis allowed the company to avoid making that change, and Dizdarevic said that, while he's not in the construction business, the company's experience in Sochi has been better than its experience in London in 2012.

During the London Games, the organizing committee required hospitality companies and sponsors to use a transportation company that it subcontracted. That company brought in drivers from outside London and they often got lost. Transportation was an issue for corporate guests throughout those Olympics, and that's a key part of the guest experience. In Sochi that hasn't been a problem.

"Just go straight, you'll run into the Olympic Park. Turn left and you go to the mountains," Dizdarevic said. "That's it. You can't get lost."

Jet Set brought in five Michelin-caliber chefs from around the world to a restaurant it set up in Sochi. The corporate program Jet Set is running in Sochi for 30,000 guests is slightly larger than what it did in Turin in 2006, when it had 26,000 guests. In addition to arranging accommodations and transport for companies, it took over a restaurant in Sochi and brought in five Michelin-caliber chefs from around the world. It's also running a restaurant in the mountains, and a 25,000-square-foot restaurant and lounge on the Olympic Park for guests.

The restaurant in the Park has been key because there aren't a lot of other options. There are three concession stands that serve beer and one restaurant. Benches are scattered around where people can sit between events.

The big question in Sochi is who's going to fill the 47,000 new hotel rooms that were built for the Olympics after the Games end. Dizdarevic believes that people from Russia and Europe will start coming in the next three to five years.

"How many times can you go to Whistler or Vail or Courchevel or Kitzbuhel?" Dizdarevic said. "People travel a lot these days. They say, 'I want to go skiing or I want to go on a summer vacation.' This is a new playground, a little village, slopes."

But that's not where Jet Set is focused now. It's focused on Rio 2016.

Dizdarevic said that corporate demand for those Games is greater than London in 2012. More than a third of his business is booked, and it's two and a half years before the opening ceremony.

"In London, everyone had to be there," Alan Dizdarevic said. "For Rio, everyone wants to be there."