

RECREATION

A Russian 'acid trip'

Scouting expedition to assess the resort potential of Russia's North Caucasus mountains was like something out of a movie

DAVID EBNER VANCOUVER

The scouting trip was a surreal scene: Private jets, helicopters, senior Russian government ministers, armoured limousines, police escorts, guns everywhere. Drunken dinners followed, the vodka flowing, including one bash in an open forest, where pigs roasted on spits.

It was Paul Mathews' wildest assignment ever. A decade ago, the veteran mountain resort designer had been called to assess the potential of Russia's North Caucasus mountains by oligarch Boris Berzovsky. "I had my own bodyguard, who was a knockoff of Arnold Schwarzenegger, called Sacha. It was like an acid trip," Mr. Mathews recalls.

Ecosign presented a plan that envisioned as many as seven ski resorts in a region Mr. Mathews believed could rival France's famed Three Valleys. The area, just 40 kilometres from the Black Sea and the Russian beach resort of Sochi, is of the rare kind that leaves winter aficionados agog: "an amazing mountain range — tonnes of snow, almost too much sometimes," Mr. Mathews says.

Control of the project eventually went to mining oligarch Vladimir Potanin, after internal Russian politics led Mr. Berzovsky to flee to exile in London.

Russian officials then began to feel they had what they needed for a Winter Olympics bid. The Olympics package was assembled in a rush in 2005, with Ecosign in charge of the outline of the mountain venue.

Mr. Mathews' presentation to Olympics officials was an important part of Russia's win of the 2014 Games. From an oligarch's private jet a decade ago — and then a closer tour by helicopter — Mr. Mathews immediately spotted the potential of the mountains. "I said," remembers Mr. Mathews, "this is definitely the place."



The Rosa Khutor resort will be home to the alpine skiing events at the 2014 Winter Games in Sochi. Right, Russia's North Caucasus mountains. ECOSIGN

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