

YANKS IN BULGARIA

They Hear 'Un Bel Di,' Cannot Buy A Rug, Settle for \$40 of Chocolates

By HAROLD C. SCHONBERG

ISTANBUL—Our hotel rooms here overlook the Bosphorus, and, as we said when we first arrived in Istanbul after a trip through Bulgaria in our little Italian station wagon, the sun somehow shines brighter here and everything is white and blue.

We entered Bulgaria, the four of us, from the Yugoslav border and pointed our Milletrecento toward Sofia. Known to its friends as the Milletre, the noble little Fiat went lurching over the dubious Bulgarian roads loaded to the gunwales. There were two bags on its overhead luggage rack, two more bags and associated equipment crammed into the rear and a couple of bottles of good Yugoslav brandy on the floor. The brandy was insurance; everybody says that, if the Milletre runs out of gasoline, it will operate perfectly well on brandy. Since the bug seems to run forever on a liter of gasoline, such an extreme measure was not necessary.

Problems, Problems

We checked into the Balkan Hotel in Sofia with a couple of problems. Two of us had made reservations in New York—for one couple; the other two also had made reservations from Rome—for the four of us.

Would we get a refund? The woman at the desk was most obliging. She spoke a little English. Yes, we could go to Balkan Tourist. Yes, they would take care of us. In the meantime, sign for everything and pay later.

We cashed a traveler's check, and discovered that the unit of currency was the lev (plural, leva) and that it was worth 50 cents. The lev was broken into 100 stotinchki.

A few leva, we discovered in the restaurant, can go a long way. Nobody can eat more than 3 leva worth, and the food, while not distinguished, was good.

We found, however, that there are booby-traps.

After walking through part of the city, we returned to the hotel, went to the bar and ordered drinks. In front of us was a plate of freshly toasted salted almonds that were still warm. How nice! How thoughtful! How delicious!

Juke Box

We sipped the very good Bulgarian brandy and ate the nuts, all to the caterwauling of an American juke box. We ordered another plate of nuts. The drinks came to only about 25 cents apiece; the nuts, on the other hand, were 270 stotinchki, or about \$1.35.

At the information desk, we learned about tours and cultural

events. "Madame Butterfly" was at the opera the next night; "Sleeping Beauty" the night after that. How much for a ticket? The best seats in the house came to 70 cents. Most agreeable, that.

As it turned out, both performances were on a provincial level, and the orchestra of the Sofia Opera is not one of the glories of the symphonic world. But "Butterfly" did turn up a lusty tenor and a very artistic soprano, and it was fun hearing "Un bel di" in Bulgarian.

Why, Why, Why?

"Why should we waste hours in the Balkan Tourist Agency?" the wives asked the next morning. "Can't the hotel desk take care of the situation?"

The woman at the desk was dubious, and, finally, the girl at the information bureau took matters in hand. They conferred, and for the next hour there was great telephoning. Triumph!

The New York couple got a complete refund. And, instead of the food coupons that had been promised, there was a full refund of food and hotel expenses for four. It was simpler to divide it this way, we were told.

We would pay our own way. And for the hotel in Haskovo, near the Turkish border, we were given a chit that would take care of hotel expenses there.

Pockets bulging with leva, two men and two women rushed into the streets of Sofia to see what the stores offered. The women went wherever women go; the men headed toward book and music stores.

Unique Music Store

There was a music store. It not only was the only one in Sofia but, the attendant said in French, also the only one in Bulgaria. The stock was small, but there was a brand new Peters edition of Handel's "Saul" that sold for about \$3 (it would cost at least \$15 in New York). Art books were in better supply; so were Russian phonograph records.

One of the women found a rug store, and, after lunch, one couple went there. They came back glowing; they had found a carpet for 78 leva, but the store would not take travelers checks or American money. The salesman would hold the rug, and the couple would come the next morning with the leva.

It was quite an experience, the woman shopper reported. Nobody in the store spoke English. A crowd gathered

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around. Some had a few words of Italian, of German, of French. Everybody wanted to help. When the deal was concluded, there was everything but cheers.

The only trouble was that, the next morning, the rug was ready, but the price was a lot more than 78 leva. It seemed that the usual lack of communication was in effect. The rug was 78 leva per meter (39.37 inches). Just a slight misunderstanding.

As we left Sofia without a rug, we kept thinking of the waiter who claimed to speak English. We asked him for an ash tray. He nodded intelligently and brightly, and came back with a napkin.

It was easy to do Sofia in three days. The city is supposed to be full of famous churches and icons, but all of the antiquities seem to be hidden, as they were in Belgrade, where all museums but the Military Museum had been closed for two years.

Mostly Modern

The art that is on view in Sofia is mostly modern, and the museum was full of prime examples of Socialist Realism. There were a few Old Masters, but the expert among us laughed most of them off as either unauthentic or old copies. Of course, there are a few old churches and exciting Roman ruins.

The road to the Turkish border was mostly good, and one does not have to worry too much about traffic in or out of the cities.

"Good" is a relative word when one drives in Yugoslavia or Bulgaria. If the road is passable, and one can squeeze by an approaching car, it is good. One must keep a firm hand on the wheel, and watch out for cows, sheep, goats and human beings who, after all, have walked these roads for centuries and do not worry about automobiles.

At the border, the usual amenities proceeded smoothly until the time came to cash unused leva, about \$40 worth. The very thought of trading our Bulgarian leva for any other currency threw the Customs people into hysterical laughter.

\$40 Question

"Do you mean to say," four travelers asked, almost in horrified unison, "that we would be out \$40 with nothing to show for it?"

Not at all, the officials said Bulgaria would hold that money until we returned. Would it not be nice to know that the money would be waiting for us?

There were screams of rage. Two wives expostulated. Two husbands started waving hands trying to express their feelings in snippets of several lan-

guages. The officials looked bored.

One of the Americans, chin thrust out, started heading toward incoming tourists. He was going to make a fast deal with the travelers entering Bulgaria. Calmer heads prevailed, and he was held back forcibly, restrained with stories about Bulgarian jails.

But we were darned if we were going to surrender the money. What was there to buy? Wines, liquor, Bulgarian cigarettes. But not \$40 worth. We could not enter Turkey with that amount of contraband.

Barter for Attar

There were some miserable pieces of woodwork, and there were vials of attar of roses. Those, at least, were small.

How much? The man said 4 leva a vial. We decided to buy eight vials of the miserable-smelling stuff. Suddenly, the price was 8 leva a vial. Communication difficulties again, perhaps, but it made one think. We finally spent \$40 on chocolate bars.

We crossed the border in a vile mood. On the Turkish side, there was a long wait. It seemed that the police official who stamped passports was out to lunch.

We moodily amused ourselves by watching Turkish Customs take cars apart, pull seats out, rap compartments with hammers and go through the luggage, stocking by handkerchief. We wondered if the same thing would happen to us, but, when our time came, the policeman simply glanced at our American passports and waved us on.

A few hours later, we arrived here in Istanbul. Glorious Istanbul! Istanbul, where one can buy American and British newspapers and magazines, where the waiters can make themselves understood.

No Regrets

We don't regret having detoured through Bulgaria. It was an experience. But we were also glad to get out. The scenery there was nice and the people nicer. But Bulgaria still has a long way to go before it catches up with the amenities of the western world.

One was ever conscious of Bulgaria's poverty, of its lack of intellectual life, of its great inexperience in dealing with visitors and of the language problem faced by those who do not speak or read Bulgarian, since the alphabet is Cyrillic.

Above all, one was conscious of the state's thought-control. One was completely out of touch with the West: no outside newspapers or radio broadcasts. Greece and Turkey might have been at war, for all we knew.

One gets a vacuum-like and even oppressive feeling. But we can say we were in Bulgaria, and, on the whole, it was worth the \$40 in chocolate bars.