

Tourism Opens Frontiers in Bulgaria



VIEW OF SOFIA—Liberty Monument is at lower center, with Parliament and Cathedral in background.

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By ARTHUR EPERON

SOFIA, Bulgaria—To find the Bulgarian State Tourist Office offering two-week holidays, one week in its own lovely country and another over the border in Istanbul, Turkey, a symbol of oppression to the Bulgars for 500 years, would have been historically and politically unthinkable five years ago.

But tourism, the world's biggest and most lucrative industry, is making a fool of history and of political and national prejudices. The economic gains from tourism are too important for most countries to ignore, and tourism despises frontiers.

Less Than 100 Years

It is less than 100 years since Bulgarians got their freedom from the Ottoman Empire after 500 years of fierce oppression, and 10 years ago the borders between the countries were firmly closed. Now, they are linked by the London-Istanbul Highway, and the Bulgars are offering holidays combining a week's minibuss tour of their own country and a week in Istanbul. As an alternative, one can spend several days to a week relaxing on the sunny sands of the Black Sea coast.

Bulgaria has previously concentrated on selling the Black-Sea beach resorts. A shortage of hotels, especially modern ones, had slightly discouraged touring throughout the country. This was a pity, for Bulgaria's roads are fairly good and the country has unusual scenery, much that is beautiful and a lot that is interesting. Now, new hotels are opening up the mountains and countryside to tourists.

The best hotels are still by the beaches or here in the

capital, Sofia. One of the most interesting is Sofia's Grand Hotel Balkan, whose courtyard encloses a red-brick Roman bath that also has served as a Byzantine church, a Moslem mosque and a Bulgarian church. The hotel has a good cellar night spot, an unusual place where you can eat or drink Bulgarian wine in a maze of rooms, nooks and hideouts—in public or secrecy.

On a summer day, most residents of Sofia make for the city's own mountains, the Vitoshas. They are 10 miles away, and the local people think nothing of walking there to lunch.

On the road is the village of Boyana, with a church built in 1259 and containing bold murals dating back to that time. They are unusual paintings and well preserved, possibly because the Turkish conquerors hid them under whitewash.

There is a lift that cuts the time up the mountains to 15 minutes; on Black Peak, 7,500 feet up, there are some fine walks and splendid views.

Eat at The Hoof

Just below is a hotel with a restaurant called Kopitoto (The Hoof), which offers good meals and magnificent views. In winter, it is a ski hotel; in summer, a place to sip wine or have lunch or dinner on the terrace, with the evening lights of the villages below. Just as attractive is a restaurant called Golden Bridges, in woodlands by a mountain stream.

Few cities in the world, even capital cities, have such pleasant and spectacular scenery so near.

Most tourists visit the Rila Monastery, only the tower of

which is original, but which is still a spectacular place. Until recently, fewer had discovered the mountain resort of Borovets, where many Bulgarian writers and artists have villas. This is a great ski center, and a fine place for mountain walking.

Nearby is Mount Musala, which at more than 9,500 feet is one of Europe's highest mountains.

Plovdiv is the next good stop on a route toward the beaches. It is the biggest city in Bulgaria, and second only to Sofia in importance. The Bulgarians love to put flowers and gardens around their towns, and Plovdiv is a lovely garden city. It also is a musical center, with a good symphony orchestra and opera house.

Spa of Hissar

The next stop should be the spa of Hissar, which has mineral waters famous since Roman times, and then Kazanlik, center of the biggest rose garden in the world. Its 7,410 acres are devoted to growing musk roses for the rose attar that goes into the world's greatest perfumes. At its best in June, when 11,000 girls are engaged in picking the roses, it is interesting at any time.

One vacation plan recently offered at a package price combines a self-drive car for a week and a week at one of the two leading beach resorts, Golden Sands near Varna, or Sunny Beach, near Nesebar.

The Black Sea beach resorts of Bulgaria and Rumania have been built in the last few years. They are situated on magnificent beaches and have modern hotels, but, unlike many other fabricated resorts in Europe, they do not have too many hotels in too

small an area, and natural landscapes such as trees, villages and old buildings have been left wherever possible.

Thus, these new resorts have less of a faked-up, film-set look than many other modern ones in Europe. And even the old resort of Druzhba, outside Varna, although modernized and enlarged in the last two years, retains a tranquil and genuinely Balkan appearance and atmosphere.

One can get really good and traditional Bulgarian food in Druzhba. A nightclub with a good floor show has been opened, but night life consists mostly of dining and dancing to Balkan music in restaurants and it usually ends at 1 A.M. One has to go to the newer resorts for livelier night life.

For more swinging holidays, the Swedish 33 Club has moved into Sunny Beach with Swedish-style fun, although strictly for under 33's.

Magnificent Beach

On a magnificent beach at Primorsko, south of Burgas, the Bulgarians have one of the best low-priced youth holiday centers in Europe. Strictly nonpolitical and open to young people from all over the world, this center is run mostly by Bulgarian university students.

The setting is magnificent—a huge beach, sand dunes fringed by woods, a background of mountains and, nearby, an old town of wooden houses. One has a choice of accommodations ranging from motel-type chalets to a hotel to tents. The restaurants have a choice of three set menus, facilities are reasonable and the entertainment is informal and good.