



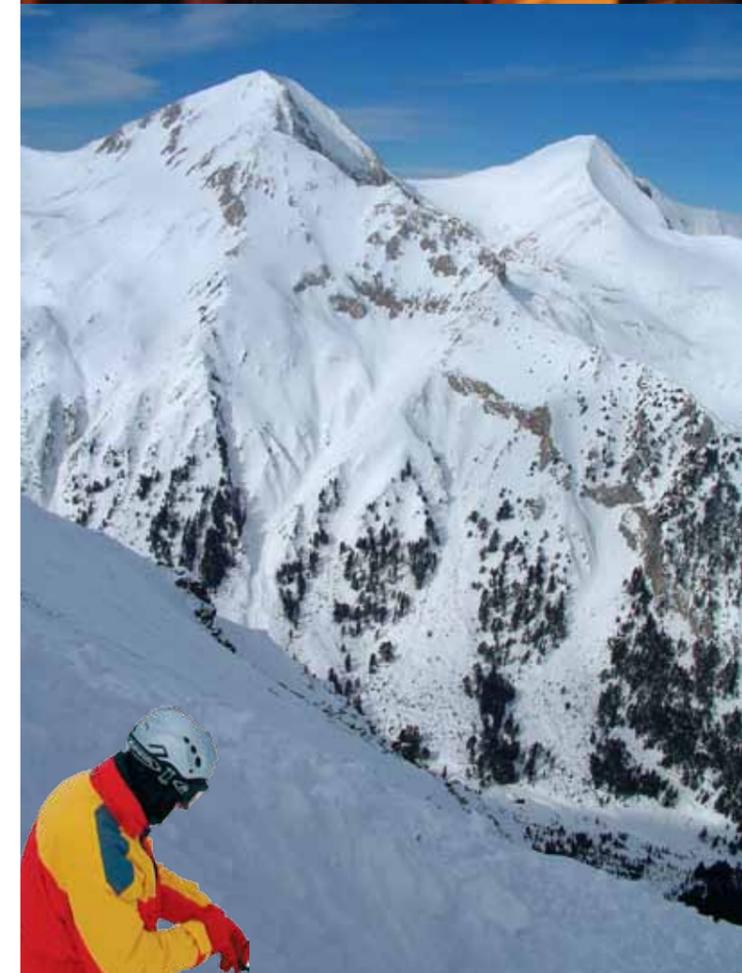
BANSKO invites us to the future of skiing in Bulgaria

Text: Barry Moore • Photo: Rauli Storm, Markku Vento

With no need to repeat the same old song on pirates, snow storms, impolite airport personel and other difficulties trying to prevent us from getting to where the SCIJ action is we may ascertain that after fairly long transfers from the little airport at Sofia, we all made it to the new ski resort of Bansko, 925 meters, most arriving after sunset.

The Hotel Strazhite is a welcoming - warm, modern and well-guarded - hotel able to accommodate all 205 SCIJ participants. So folk were soon renewing old friendships with fellow journalists from 33 countries. Few ventured far out into the village and cold temperatures that night, preferring to dine in the hotel and huddle in the bars ahead of the coming week's exertions. **TURN PAGE**

- ▶ *A lovely little retreat up there?*
- Torches, fireworks, hairy scary friendly monsters and loud "music" to scare the devils.*
- ◀ *The church of the Rila monastery.*
- A baaad off-piste from the Todorin side to the Muratov side.* ▶



Motto: LIKE BEING SAVAGED BY (the memory of) A DEAD SHEEP

Meaning Like being beaten up with a feather.

Origin Said by combative UK Labour politician Dennis Healey when verbally attacked by the mild mannered Tory minister Geoffrey Howe. Originally claimed to have been an adaptation of Churchill's remark that an attack by Attlee was "like being savaged by a pet lamb".

Prologue: AM I A MURDERER?

Text: Rauli Storm

We were having a three-week holiday in Zlatny Pjasazi, a holiday resort at the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria. "We" means here my wife and another couple. Oh yes, also present, at the age of minus 3,5 months, was our son Robert, who was to become a member of SCIJ 23 years later.

We had bought a bottle of ice-cold pink champagne at a kiosk outside our hotel on our way to the Varna railway station to visit the exciting Veliko Tornovo, the capital of the Second Bulgarian Empire from late 12th century till 1396.

The day was hot and the champagne bottle got warmer and warmer. We put it under the seat in order to keep the cork tight. As the temperature in the train cabin was reaching the figures of a Finnish sauna we got worried of the bottle bursting up. I

took it carefully to the train toilet and pointed it through the open window towards the rapidly passing forest. I had half opened the iron wire when BANG the cork and most of the champagne came off. At the very moment a field opened and I had a quick glimpse of a flock of sheep. The cork flew with such speed that I didn't see it at all and as quickly as the forest had opened to a field it closed up again.

Did I kill a sheep or a shepherd? If there are investigators of

cold cases in Bulgaria, my confession is above. In those days buying a hasty leave ticket to Bulgaria including flights and three weeks in a three star hotel with half pension was cheaper than staying and eating at home in Finland. By sheer luck Kirka Babitzin - the most popular pop singer in Finland at the time performed in the Golden Orpheus festival the second week of our holiday and I had a private interview with him for the TV magazine I worked in as an art director at the time. This sheer co-

incidence caused me more orders of interviews. The next year I met privately e.g. Frank Zappa, Loudon Wainwright and Alice Cooper. We even corresponded later with Loudon and he sent me pictures of his children Rufus and Martha who are both now more famous than their dad.

So, Bulgaria gave me a kick-start as a writing journalist and the profession brought me back to Bulgaria as a skiing journalist. It took me almost thirty years to re-

turn. The customs officer stared at me too long. In front of me he whispered something to his colleague. Did he say: "Hei Boris, don't look, but we have the shepherd killer here now." They simply couldn't recognize me. I used to have my hair to my shoulders and big moustache. Had there been a flock of sheep and a shepherd or has my mind turned the possibility of hitting someone with the cork of the champagne bottle to a clear memory? ●



▲▲ All the new buildings at Bansko ski resort honour the old architecture of the region.

▲ A sunny afternoon bring grannies out to exchange news.

◀◀ Sepp Thayer in his ski instructor outfit.

◀ Mario Sensini, Victoria Repetto and Alessandro Corbi discuss the dangers of smoking.

▶ Guest House Dedo Pene, a wonderful old house with great kitchen.

Sunday morning our Bulgarian hosts had arranged instructors to familiarise us with the slopes. The brilliant weather allowed a full view of our surroundings - wide expanses of forested slopes supporting about 700 meters of open snow fields, and, above, rocky summits. The Bulgarians consider Bansko the most "Alpine" of eastern European ski resorts and they are doubtless right.

Not that many people were hanging around at the 2,560-meter top of the lifts. It was below minus 20 centigrade up there most of the week and, with the wind, one could easily believe it.

Apart from open slopes, ideal for carving, near the top, most of the runs cut through the dark pine woods. They are very well groomed, generally wide, but, considering Bansko is primarily aimed at beginners and intermediates, give fast descents and a fair variety of gradient even for more experienced skiers.

In particular, you can ski some interesting lines on the red run starting from the top of the lift system and turning into a steeper, black run. It takes you down 900 meters to the main lift hub at 1,635 meters. I saw no moguls, though this may have been due to, happily for us, the relatively small number of other skiers that week and to regular top-ups of fresh snow.

So after a pleasing introduction to the beauties



◀ Blaz Mosnic on his SCIJ CC debut

▲ Hartmut Krause on Banderitza 2 piste after heavy snowfall.

of the Pirin mountains dominating Bansko and the wide valley beyond, we changed and readied ourselves for the real business of the week, the gruelling schedule of daytime and apres-ski happenings that characterise a SCIJ annual meeting.

First, back 200 meters up the road to the lift base, to make the acquaintance of what must be one of the best mountain bars anywhere in Europe: the "Happy End", a rustic barn of a place able to handle 250-odd journos and organisers in a cosy manner. This was for a film presenting the joys of Bansko and introducing some of the sponsors.

Then back down the hill for the great set-piece event: the parade of the nations where journos, whose physical prowess does not normally extend beyond uncorking a few bottles of wine, get to vicariously live the dream and, bearing flaming torches and national flags, saunter en masse through a foreign town as if really representing our countries at an Olympic opening. Locals and tourists looked on somewhat bemused!

Still, if you overlook the fact the most SCIJ members currently tend to the "experienced" end of the age spectrum, it does resorts no harm

to host the journalists' skiing "world championship"... And Bansko put on a quite a show for us, for residents and visitors. The main square was festooned for a mini-Olympics-style ceremony, complete with music, dancers, stage, floodlights, crowds of spectators, lasers etc.

To the drone of wild Bulgarian bagpipes, there suddenly appeared amongst us a bunch of unrecognisable hairy types leaping about the place like Yetis on acid. No alarm: merely demons dressed in the native goat skins.

After speeches, more folkloric singing and dancing and a magnificent firework display - all much appreciated (as was the brandy and grilled sausage) - we trooped back up the hill to the Happy End where we fixed our own notorious "Nations' Night".

For the uninitiated, this is, a unique event where journos are supposed to call on any latent culinary craft they may possess, or at least open up heavy suitcases lugged from thousands of miles away, and put on a spread of national gastronomic specialities to titillate the jaded palates of international colleagues.

Everyone mills about, tasting foods and drinks from far-flung corners of the earth (watch



▲▲ We danced...
 ▲ ...and they tried to play to our rhythm.
 The did it for us, the Bulgarian SCIJ.

out for allegedly chewable jerky from the US and unspecified Balkan distillates), making new friends, and generally forgetting all about previous years' resolutions not to mix drinks.

On this occasion, the team of the UK of GB and NI (Seven English and one NI) provided for the delectation of the other 32 nations a table of produce from ... Scotland. Our single malts, oatcakes, shortbread and smoked salmon were all in great demand.

Anyway, after consuming as much charcuterie, caviar, hot and cold cheeses, potatoes, pasta, red and white wines from Switzerland to Argentina, and spirits from Islay to Estonia, the very least the doctor orders is two or three hours on the dance floor.

And SCIJ members need no encouragement, especially as the Happy End just happened to have the right DJ for the occasion (i.e. playing golden oldies as well as modern vibes).

Not much later the same day, we set off to ski any still untried runs. The heavy snowfalls seen round much of Europe had reached Bansko and we were glad to have seen the wide panoramas of the Banko valley and surrounding mountain ranges on the fine Sunday. For two days we were to be mainly in snow, overcast conditions or actual cloud. But, given the fresh white stuff, it was a great opportunity for some modest off-piste. Anyway the powder was perfect.

About this time, rumours started to emerge of the excellent hotel facilities, including pool, sauna, massages, steam and fitness rooms. I dare say a few people less enamoured of deep snow started to test them that night. Others had the opportunity to hear the latest position on Bulgaria's accession to the EU from the deputy foreign minister. In a nutshell, he reckons the country, along with Romania, could and should join next year, and not be delayed by one year, as the 25 EU governments might yet decide.

Dinner Monday was the chance many of us had for the first time to visit "old" Bansko, wander in the traditional streets and dine in one of the old log cabin-style restaurants. Very agreeable, especially if you like spit-roasted suckling pig.

It has to be said that Bansko offers the full range of night-life, by which I do not mean only the British-type pubs and drinking dens catering to its large UK clientele, some of them permanent residents.

With Tuesday came the great day of the Giant Slalom. The cold and biting wind did not make for the normally convivial atmosphere which helps pass the long hours of awaiting your turn. The course looked grey, though it in fact benefited from large falls of snow which the preparers had managed to press into good shape. Because of the cold, and as the wind had iced up the steepest part immediately out of the upper starting gate, that section of the course was cut out on safety grounds.

It was nevertheless a fine, fairly steep track, though late runners complained they found themselves in increasingly icy and treacherous grooves. Unfortunately the cold meant there was little track-side support and none of the habitual end-run creature comforts, such as St Bernard-style brandy.

After warming up and fortifying themselves at base station, a few of us set out again, this time to find deep snow under the chairlifts and one marvellous forest track leading to a nifty 30-meter wall, heavily-snowed, which proved a lot of fun.

The evening was devoted to SCIJ's annual general meeting, held at Bansko's poshest hotel, the luxurious Kempinski. Forthcoming activities (our next winter meeting will be in the Pyrenees) were presented and, as a piece de resistance, the election was held for the club's most senior officers. Such procedures are always instructive and this one was no exception.



In the end, our Swiss colleague Miguel Aquiso was elected president and Roberto Micalli of Italy secretary-general. They take over from Ivana Suhadolc and long-serving Peter Daalder, whose terms expired. The excellent thus replace the excellent. Back at our own hotel, a celebratory drinks party was held, which went on far into the small hours (again..)

So after four nights of philosophising, and carousing, it was perhaps little surprise that not everyone made the early coach departures for the two-hour trip to the much older resort of Borovets. The resort is undergoing modernisation as part of Bulgaria's 2014 Winter Olympics bid. On this occasion snow conditions there were poor, and those who remained at Bansko enjoyed fine skiing and ... the one opportunity of the week to test the pool and sauna etc. Highly recommended.

Dinner was enlivened by more of the folk music and dancing which seems a Bulgarian national speciality. Some journalists absconded for alternative party downtown in one of the typical local taverns. Cosy, but too small to accommodate dancing. So back to the Happy End.

Meanwhile, those who had not budgeted from the Strazhite had become sufficiently mellow to replace the Bulgarian group's music with various medleys from their own folk and pop tradition. To a latecomer's ear it seemed no one remembered any more than a single line of any of these ditties. Nevertheless the evening went on a long time and was held to have embodied the renowned "Spirit of SCIJ".

▲▲ No use to try and describe the delicacies we enjoyed.

▲ International stammering of pop songs by the Beatles, Abba, etc.

◀ Tina Turner sound-alike.

It was noticeable that the hotel lobbies emptied earlier than usual as members attempted to be on best (possible) form for the dreaded Cross Country race on the morrow. This event, mainly appealing to Nordics and fitness freaks, also provides the opportunity to take photos of otherwise normal souls falling apart (and falling over, if the course is at all hilly or has sharp bends) or pushing themselves to the point of collapse. Those who watched the Turin Olympics may think X-country requires superhuman fitness, but in fact it can also simply be an excellent method for anyone to get around in (not too deep) snow or do an excellent workout. Non-competitive, non-experts at SCIJ can enjoy the general mirth, bonhomie, the reviving selection of brandies and, not to be missed, the Dutch team's Pea Soup.

Fears that bitter cold risked finishing off the less fit amongst our membership proved unfounded, since the weather that morning turned out to be sunny but not hot, the course no monster but fantastically beautiful, the snow and "rails" in perfect condition.

With the efforts thus expended by most runners precluding more serious physical activity, the choice that afternoon was between two coach trips: either to Bulgaria's finest and largest monastery at Rila or to the quaint, Ottoman-Greek village (the country's smallest "town") of Melnik. As the latter's attractions were height-ened in the advance publicity by being combined with a wine-tasting, your correspondent decided to go with the flow.

The two-hour journey effectively took us round the Pirin mountain range to Melnik which, as the crow flies, cannot lie very far away at all. It was worth it, since we arrived, still in the afternoon light, and could admire the 17/18th century stone and timber mansions pinned to the sides of a steep valley of sandstone "pyramids".

The town, which dates back to Thracian, pre-Roman times, has been settled over and over again, despite upheavals, political and geological. It has been destroyed at least twice by earthquake, and one wondered still about the stability of the yellow sandstone peaks, ridges and walls towering above the old houses.

The wine, at least, was safe, kept as it was in the long, winding caves/cellars carved deep into the soft hillsides.

And it tasted good. No doubt about it. In a hefty, old-fashioned way. Just what was needed as the cold became more intense after sundown.

The village became more magical in the dark: no traffic, a few flickering lights high up under looming gables. Inside the four-square houses, rich woven fabrics and stained glass offset painted woodwork, hidden alcoves and spy-holes of the Ottoman period.

Time to go. This time on to Damianitza and its modern winery. With its shining stainless steel vats it seemed a far cry from the giant, dusty barrels at Melnik, but in fact some of the wine is made from the same local grape.

After a lively presentation, the thirsty journalistic consensus was that both old and modern styles will do well in current export markets. With that, on to dinner in a country tavern for sharp rakhia spirit as aperitif, raw cabbage as starter and pressed chicken as main course...



▲▲ *Not only souvenir shops downtown Bansko.*

▲ *A thirsty dog at the a fountain of the Rila monastery.*

▼▼ *We always have the CC competition on a sunny day.*

◀ *A column at the Rima monastery church.*

▼ *Shiligarnik piste.*

▼▼ *Funny how much food and drink there is always left afte Nations' Night.*

This fuel perhaps encouraged the high-spirited contingent of French and Anglos at the back of one coach to continue the dubious musical renditions of the previous night - with no greater memory for the words and perhaps with less concern, so it was reported, for those trying to doze at the front...

With another party arranged in the Hotel Strazhite for the return - the British team added their remaining single malts to fresh Bulgarian specialties ... giving due consideration to those who had demonstrated the keenest scientific interest in the comparative tastings at the Nations Night and again congregated around the bottles.

Another short night sleepwise ensued, and those SCIJ members who took to the slopes on that final day found continuing excellent snow conditions. Later at the Happy End bar Sofia presented its bid to host the Winter Olympics in 2014. It would appear to have more than reasonable chances, with Bansko itself offering excellent Alpine facilities, a plethora of Nordic venues round the country, Borovets updating itself, Vitusha mountain already offering night-time skiing directly above the capital, and transport infrastructure due to be modernised as soon as the country joins

the EU. No less a light than Austro-Luxembourger racing legend Marc Girardelli, a campaign front man, told us on the slopes he reckons the final decision will come down to Bulgaria or Korea.

The Olympic theme continued with a show of skiwear by the (Anzi) Besson fashion house, which was seen a few days later to be kitting out several teams at the Turin Olympics. They included the French with their surprise winner of the blue riband men's downhill, and the Austrians who ended up with a big medal haul.

After a dinner packed into every last dark recess of a bar crowded out by SCIJ members and all those Bulgarians who had helped to make the week a great success, came the last act. An astounding punk songstress led her rock and soul band onstage, so requiring all those with any energy left to wildly dance the night away. A remarkable number summoned their last reserves to do just that.

It is not recorded who, if any, managed to sleep that night before the staggered stream of coaches started on their way back to Sofia in the early hours. I can report, however, that our coach left last, some time after 11, and only just made it to the airport in time for a flight at 1545. ●