

Beyond Bansko

The alpine landscape of Bulgaria's Pirin Mountains is home to Europe's budget ski capital. But affordable though it may be, this region is rich in wildlife that faces an uncertain future

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The Pirin Mountains of Bulgaria are, like the Rila Mountains from which they are separated by the Predel saddle, a mighty alpine landscape. These ridges boast the highest peaks in the Balkans, with Musala (2,925m) and Vihren (2,914m) rearing high. The northern part of the Pirin Range is a national park, and a designated UNESCO World Heritage Site. Ancient woodlands, pristine glacial lakes and an abundant wildlife have survived wars, communist times and gangster capitalism after the fall of the Iron Curtain.

Yet this all may be in grave danger now. As the WWF revealed in December 2017, 400km² of old-growth forest – two thirds of the national park – has been opened to commercial logging by the government, which claims to

only do so in a 'sustainable' way. By surprising coincidence, this rededication of protected land corresponds with the development plans of ULEN, the licensee of the Bansko ski resort (936m to 2,600m), which is located on the northern border of the national park.

Bansko is the budget ski capital of Europe. Thousands of Brits come here every winter queuing for miles to get up on one of the 13 ski lifts operating on the slopes of Todorka (2,746m). The old town, consisting of quaint stone houses of 19th century merchants and frescoed farmsteads, has long been disfigured by half finished apartment blocks, strip clubs, gambling parlours and cheap eateries. Who can't afford a chalet in Courchevel is eager to snatch up one of the rickety flats marketed to the budget expat

▼ A walk with a view: Hofer and Meto en route to Peak Musala in the Rila Range



We took off our hiking skins and plunged into the deep, frolicking in untracked terrain like children who had just invented skiing as a means to fall weightlessly to earth

unfazed by boom and bust of Bulgarian property prices. The planning application filed by the resort operator features 333km of new pistes and 113 ski lifts, which would propel the resort into the top league of European winter sport, a 12-fold expansion of the current facilities. The WWF, worried about the habitat for brown bears, chamois and capercaillie, is alarmed, and so is the European Commission, which had included Pirin in its Natura 2000 programme.

A RENDEZVOUS WITH NATURE

I visited Bansko with my friend Georgy 'Shoro' Georgiev, Austrian guide Schorsch Schiechl, and Meto Chilimanov, my friend and mountain guide from Macedonia. Day one saw us heading deep into the Bansko backcountry. Some of the giant pine trees we passed dated back to Byzantine times. They have survived the Ottoman conquest and Balkan Wars, but could soon fall victim to the government of Boyko Borisov – PM, judoka and ex-bodyguard.

To our left steep couloirs were sloping down between the cliffs west of Bansko's top chairlift, popular with freeride skiers and snowboarders. The 40-degree chutes were already heavily tracked from the day before.

To reach the entrance of the valley we had to pass the finishing line of one of the descents of the Snowboard World Cup competition held in Bansko with great fanfare. Technicians were busy preparing the boards, athletes were warming up with tentative test jumps and runs along the race track – a far cry from our rendezvous with nature.

Resounding silence embraced us as the announcements of the competition subsided. With our skins on we hiked up the flat valley for perhaps two hours, past the Academia and Vihren refuge huts, determined to reach Vihren, the highest peak in the Pirin Range.

We advanced on fluffy powder snow under cobalt blue skies. Tracks of snow hare and snow cock weaved haphazardly through the hills. Soon the mighty trees gave way to dwarf pines, until we finally reached open alpine territory. The sun was bearing down on us, so that we soon had to take off our anoraks.

After a three-hour climb we were on the top of Hvoynati Vrh (2,665m) opening a 360-degree panorama of ice, rugged rock and sheer cliffs. We waved to Malka Todorka (2,712m), Karaulite (2,633m) and, tantalisingly close yet separated by a steep ridge, Vihren.

The sun was so fierce that the snow had transformed into spring snow by now, and the flanks started to destabilise. We therefore decided to forgo Vihren, which would have meant another two hours' hike from where we were, and instead took off our hiking skins and plunged into the deep, frolicking in untracked terrain like playful children who had just invented skiing as a means to fall weightlessly down to earth.

CAREFUL TURNS AND CURRY NIGHTS

The next day we skied from Todorka into the Yulen Reserve, an intricate landscape interspersed with countless lakes now frozen and white. After hiking and skiing some of the ridges overlooking the lakes we ended

up in the Demyanitsa valley, stopping for lunch at the refuge of the same name – a sturdy 19th century stone hut. Here we met Petja Koltheva, a lawyer from Sofia in the company of her daughter and her boyfriend. Petja is an avid alpinist – Bulgaria's first woman to scale Mt Everest.

Like Shoro and his partner Milena, Petja dreads the feared destruction of the national park. "I pity the brown bear of course, and all the animals who will have nowhere to go. But most of all I lament the irreplaceable loss of silence, when wild slopes are transformed into discotheques. Who needs ski pistes?" she sighs, "when you can ski like that?" We all looked contentedly at the plaids of careful turns we had just left behind.

We were sitting on a bench in the sun with our backs to the stone wall of the hut, spooning our lentil soup with the beer bottles stuck in the snow in front of us. Every now and then snow slipped from the roof with a thump. "The irony is," explained Milena, "that we were demonstrating for years to get a second chairlift installed to carry skiers from the village to the main skiing area. The queues in the morning are testing, and it certainly doesn't help that the guests lodging in the Kempinski Hotel can use a priority lane. We, the plebs, are really pissed off after two hours of waiting. But what we are offered now is the total annihilation of a nature reserve."

Back at base our Hotel Avalon was rolling out its celebrated Curry Night. Once a week the British expat community of Bansko comes together for pre-drinks in the bar, while innkeeper James Hughes is busy in the kitchen preparing the countless arrays of Indian and Nepali dishes to be stacked on a 10m buffet, complete with fragrant bowls of saffron rice and naan bread.

James is a very good chef, and a uniquely hospitable innkeeper. Little wonder he's the darling of the regulars. It was a colourful crowd coming together for the evening. The air was buzzing with cock and bull stories of unheard of skiing prowess, in accents from Liverpool to Hackney.

The lads and their ladies peppered their yarn with colourful swear words and hilarious laughter. All sported tattoos, sunburns and respectable beer bellies. Some were already wearing crutches and plaster casts to illustrate their case in point. The mood was hilarious. It's one of the top events in Bansko and people we met at the dinner return for many years from as far away as the US and Israel for the occasion.

The walls of the bar and the restaurant area were densely covered with photographs of proud regulars and hotel guests, heroically posing around summit crosses in the Pirin, Rila and Rhodope mountains. We promise to send a picture from the top of Musala, at 2,925m the highest peak of the Balkans.

Not wishing to disappoint James we drive 130km the next day to Borovets at the foot of Musala. It is the oldest ski resort in Bulgaria, dating back to the 1960s.

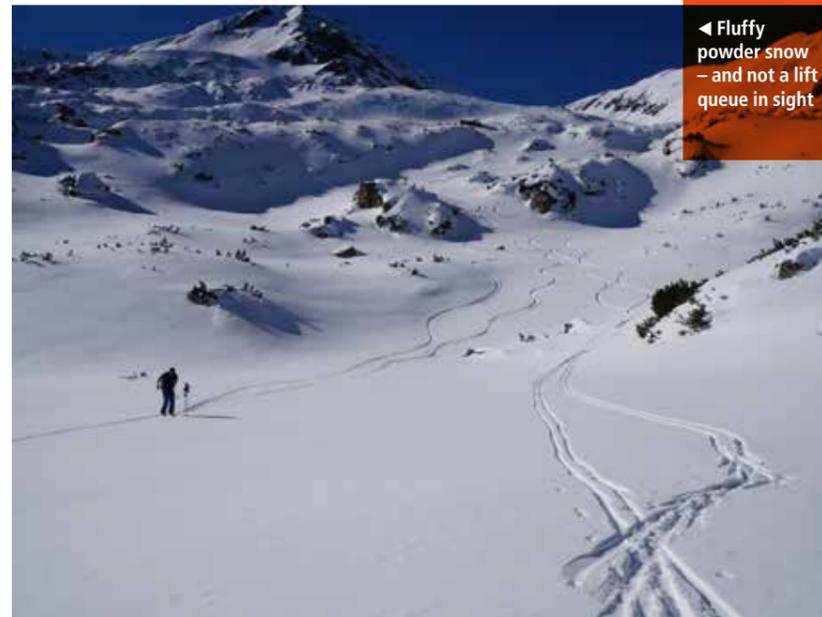
The ski facilities are state of the art today, with 58km of ski pistes for skiers of all levels. Although the hotels and apartment blocks have somewhat copied the worst architectural sins of France, it is a pleasant and lively place, more appealing even than Bansko.



◀ Hofer skins past the Vihren refuge, en route to Vihren peak



▶ Hofer and Meto on Hvoynati Vrh (2,665m)



◀ Fluffy powder snow – and not a lift queue in sight



▶ Skinning for fresh tracks in the Yulen Reserve



◀ Hofer on top of Musala (2,925m), the highest peak in the Balkans



▶ Meto lets 'em run in the Yulen Reserve

INEXPENSIVE SKIING IN THE EAST

BOROVETS, BULGARIA

For an affordable way to tackle a beginner ski or snowboarding holiday, Bulgaria could be a good bet – and Borovets, the oldest ski resort in Bulgaria, dating back to the 1960s, is a good all-round resort. It's a great place to learn skiing, with excellent English-speaking ski schools and an abundance of gentle tree-lined and intermediate slopes to progress onto.

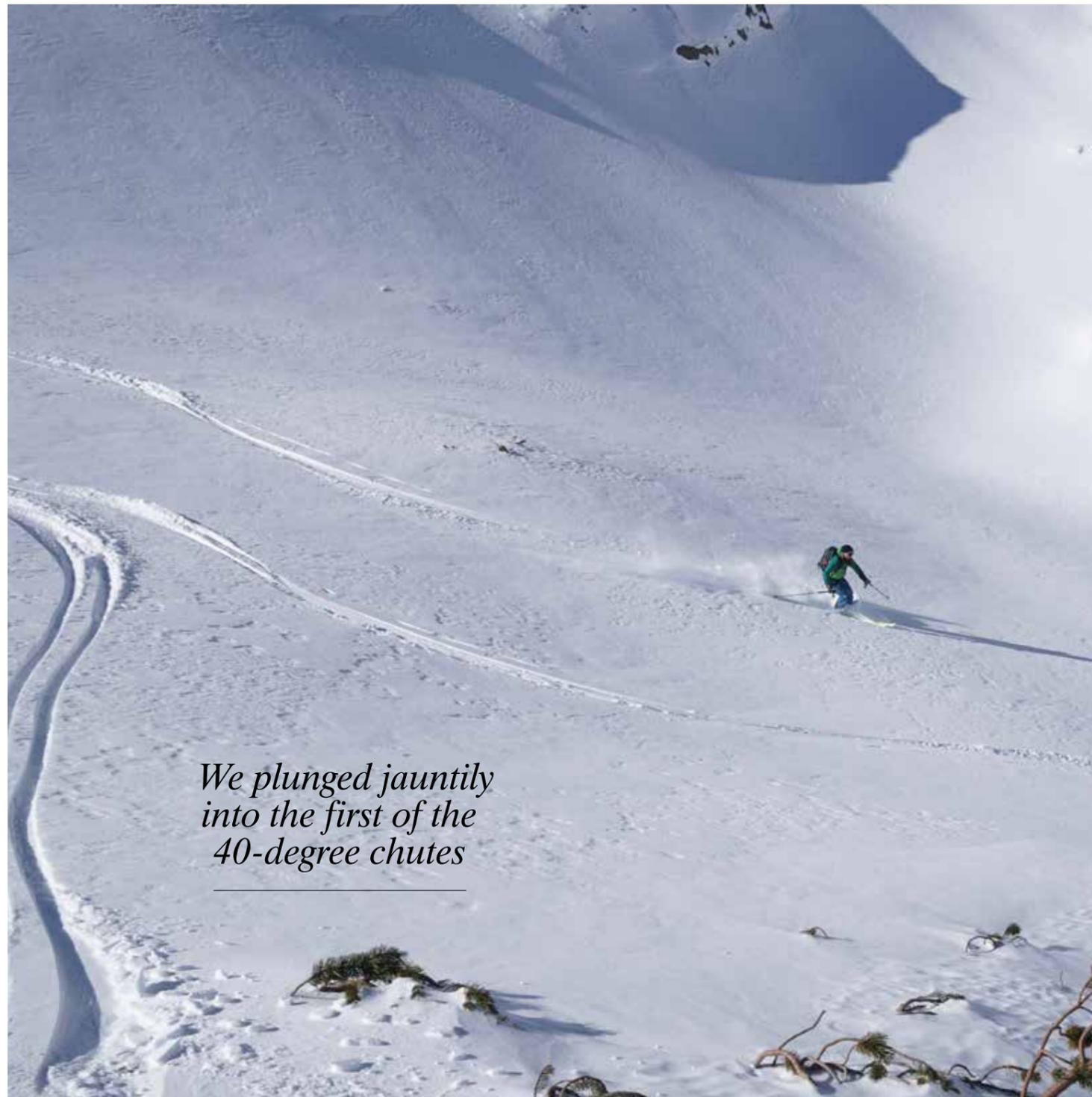
✦ Details: Crystal Ski Holidays can take you to Borovets for £529pp, staying half-board at the four-star Hotel Rila, including flights from Birmingham to Sofia and transfers. Price is given for departure on January 12. Visit crystalski.co.uk

KRANJSKA GORA, SLOVENIA

Just an hour from Slovenia's capital Ljubljana, Kranjska Gora is a great resort for first-time skiers and riders who are still finding their legs on the slopes. It has 18 runs of varying length and difficulty, with a top elevation of 1,215m.

✦ Details: SkiLine, an independent ABTA travel agent, has three holidays on offer over the winter period varying between £605-£724pp for a seven-night half-board holiday, with flights available from eight UK airports. Visit skiline.co.uk

✦ Dates: 15 December from £694pp; 12 January from £605pp or £724pp, depending on accommodation.



We plunged jauntily into the first of the 40-degree chutes

PALACES AND POWDER GALORE

Like all royalty in the 19th century Balkans, Prince Ferdinand of Saxe-Coburg-Gotha, who declared Bulgarian independence from the Ottomans in 1908, too hailed from German aristocracy. He and his entourage built lavish villas in the dense spruce forests of Borovets. His hunting lodge, Bistritsa Palace, and many of the other villas can still be visited today. Some have been converted into hotels, but most of them, alas, are out of repair. Ferdinand's grandson, Prince Simeon, peculiarly prime minister after the fall of Communism, is today's landlord of Bistritsa Palace, complete with a floor-to-ceiling cemetery of animal trophies and ungainly 19th century furniture.

We started our hike from the top station of the Yastrebetz gondola. As in Bansko, Schoro was highly popular with the lift personnel. Everyone hugged or high-fived him, and we did not have to pay for the lift pass. We were part of staff,

so to say. The three-hour hike to Peak Musala followed the masts and rusty remains of a 19th century telephone line, connecting the palace with a weather station on top of the mountain. The prince wanted to make sure that he and his regal guests would not be surprised by thunderstorms when venturing into alpine terrain. The blokes manning the station must have been a sturdy lot: when we reached the final ridge to the summit, where the weather station and the summit cross awaited us, we had to climb on all fours, skis tied to our rucksacks.

The view from the top was breathtaking. We could see as far as Vihren in the Pirin Mountains, mighty Olympus in Greece and all the peaks we had scaled with gusto in previous years: Tito Peak, the Pindos Range, the Albanian Alps and Mount Korab, the highest point of the West Balkans, lodged between Albania and Macedonia.

Below us, hidden somewhere in the deep forests, was the

▲ A land of Balkan princes, brown bears and epic lines...

Rila Monastery, a treasure trove of gaudy frescos and priceless relics. Founded in the 10th century and built into an ecclesiastical defence fortress in the 14th century, it is the centre of Bulgaria's spirituality.

We dutifully took summit pictures for James and his Avalon Hotel, happy that yet another sunny day made the ascent an easy and enjoyable walk. After having taken our skins off we plunged jauntily into the first of the 40-degree chutes fanning out from the weather station: powder galore in untracked terrain. After a good 800 vertical metres, we hit the ski pistes again to follow the Musala Pathway blue run winding its way back into the resort.

Meanwhile, skiers from not far away Sofia, Germany and the UK celebrated a carefree day in the mountains not giving much thought to the uncertain future of Bulgaria's ski resorts. For now, at least, the Rila Monastery Nature Park seems safe. For how long, remains to be seen.



SEE FOR YOURSELF...

✦ The ski touring and freeride adventures of Andreas Hofer in Bulgaria (as well as those in Albania, Montenegro, Kosovo and Macedonia) were organised by Metodi Chilimanov (metodi.chilimanov@gmail.com; +38975 563130). Meto is fluent in English and all Balkan languages and knows everyone who is anyone in Alpinism; he will draft the itinerary, organise accommodation and meals (at all budget levels from basic to luxury). He hires UIAGM mountain guides if needed (he is a good guide but not internationally qualified) and also arranges car hire. All travel expenses are directly paid by his guests without kick-backs or profit for him; he charges €120 per day plus his own accommodation.

