

Five-star thrills that won't break the Bansko

HOW'S this for a skiing day? Having spent an exhilarating morning on superbly groomed, wide-open runs, I enjoy a hearty lunch on the sun terrace of a rustic-looking mountain restaurant.

To end my day on a supremely high note, I take a ski-lift to the dizzying height of 8,500ft and ski the long, rewarding run to resort level, where there are more than eight uninterrupted miles of piste, starting with expansive, high-speed, smoothed slopes leading down into the trees, where the winding, snowy boulevard, cut through the pine forests, makes for an enchanting final cruise, ending rather conveniently outside the ski-room door of my five-star hotel.

There, an attendant helps me off with my boots, puts them on an overnight warming machine and brings me my soft, everyday shoes. Up in my room I shower, don a bathrobe and head down to the spa for a well earned soak in the hot tub followed by a soothing massage.

I retire to my room and, after a nap in my luxurious, bouncy castle of a king-sized bed, wake refreshed and more than slightly peckish, my only dilemma being whether to satisfy my hunger in the hotel's Italian restaurant, its international cuisine establishment or the top-class Japanese dining room.

Now get this. A week of such luxury, including a grand buffet breakfast each morning, seven



Bulgaria's favourite resort offers skiing luxury at bargain prices, says Neil English

nights' five-star accommodation, return flights and transfers, will cost, for example in March next winter, a staggeringly low £454 per person.

So where on earth could this be possible? Certainly not in the swanky French resorts of Courchevel or Val d'Isere, where for that money you would struggle to get one night in such sumptuousness. Nor in the elite winter-sports playgrounds of St Moritz or Zermatt in Switzerland.

Some well-heeled regular visitors to those last two opulent destinations will spend, in a week, what it would cost to buy a one-bedroom apartment in the Bulgarian resort of Bansko, to which I am referring. That's about £50,000, by the way.

I know of no other ski resort in the world that can offer comparable excellence, on and off the mountain, at such low prices.

If the Indian national tourist

authority can get away with using the marketing slogan 'Incredible India', then I think the Bulgarians should hold their heads up high and proudly use the phrase 'Brilliant Bansko'.

The ancient town of Bansko, which sits at the base of the dominant Pirin Mountain, on which all the skiing takes place, dates back thousands of years and is a World Heritage Site.

WHEN they heard Bansko was earmarked for major ski-resort development, historians and the green lobby were outraged.

You can see why, since the town has tripled in size over the past few years. A rabid property boom has seen the old town surrounded by the modern, still-expanding resort. That said, the

original Bansko is not overshadowed by towering hotels and apartment blocks. All development has adhered to a policy of a maximum of five floors, including the internationally powerful Kempinski hotel group's very attractive new establishment in town, the Grand Arena.

Most new buildings are clad in local materials of stone and wood and typical Bulgarian village architecture is widely reflected, which, to my eyes, is rather pleasing. But the building must stop and stop now because developers are rapidly encroaching on National Park and National Forest land. Moreover, there is a need to avoid the situation where there are more enthusiastic skiers and snowboarders filling the beds in the resort than the ski-lift network, or skiable terrain, can handle.

Already, due to the modern lift





HIGH FLYER: Bansko has some superb slopes, left, but, above, can be overcrowded at weekends

GETTING THERE

Balkan Holidays (0845 130 1114, www.balkanholidays.co.uk) offers highly competitive deals at all three mainstream Bulgarian ski resorts including Bansko, as well as holidays to Slovenia, Serbia and Romania.

system and massive hype surrounding the swift emergence of such a glamorous Bulgarian ski resort, the weekend traffic from the nation's capital Sofia and other cities is arguably too great for the handsome Pirin Mountain and its 43 miles of prepared pistes to cope with.

Two other far more established but less modern ski resorts in Bulgaria - Borovets and Pamparova - are both closer to Sofia but skiers are driving further at weekends to reach Bansko, clearly making it a victim of its own success.

The lifts seemed to handle the level of skiers in the high-season week I was there. I barely queued at all (though I have heard grave reports of hour-long queues at the main cable car). Then again, I have seen far worse lift queues at high-season periods in countless other European resorts.

The ski slopes themselves felt

too busy at the weekend and, with the Bulgarians' seemingly rampant appetite for high-speed thrills, and their sometimes precious-little regard for other slope-users, I'm afraid to report that weekend skiing was quite unnerving.

By contrast, on the weekdays I spent skiing in Bansko, I felt as though I owned my own ski mountain - and a very good one at that.

Kempinski certainly obeyed the first commandment of real estate, 'location, location, location', with the siting of its five-star Grand Arena in Bansko. It is a walk of just 100ft from the main cable-car station and is the prime bit of property in the ski resort.

Many four-star hotels in Bansko offer fine facilities, too, and

numerous British tour operators have been quick to sign up large allocations of their rooms to cater for the ever more popular Bansko ski scene.

MY TIPS must include a good walk around the old town, which has more than 100 registered protected sites of historical interest, one of my favourites being the Church of Saint Trinity with its iconic bell-tower.

Not far from here is the Dedo Pene Inn, one of scores of mehana (traditional restaurants) in the resort's old and new towns. The shepherd's salad, comprising delicious, crumbly white cheese with fresh tomatoes, onions, peppers and ham in

a dressing of luscious local olive oil and light vinegar, will more than suffice, but can be followed by a traditional Bulgarian mixed grill of superb meats, basted to moist perfection in their own juices while cooked over an open fire.

All of this will tell you a great deal about Bulgarian cuisine and the Bulgarian passion for fine food.

I had to agree with the way it was all summed up by my tour guide, and now friend, from Balkan Holidays, Milen Bojikin, who introduced me to both the steepest and the kindest ski slopes in Bansko and taught me a lot about Bulgarian food, Bulgarian friendship and the still ridiculously cheap prices.

He said: 'I have travelled extensively around Europe and much farther afield, but when the snow is good, the sun is out and you can see and ski these beautiful mountains, or shop in some of the fine boutiques, have a great spa, choose from countless fantastic restaurants, go swimming, ice-skating, bowling, to the casino or just visit historic sites, then I am not sure I would rather spend my winters anywhere else.'

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