

Bulgaria 2007 with Jim Gold Tours

By Carol Karels

Raindrops on roses and whiskers on kittens, bright copper kettles, and... warm cheese *banitsa* were just a few of my favorite things as I traveled through little-known Bulgaria in August 2007 with Jim Gold International Folk Tours. Our group, which included (but was not limited to!) folk dancers, musicians, and singers, danced through the country--on mountain tops, in hotel lobbies, taverns, and folk festivals between visits to historic sites.

Jim's "Mad Shoe Tour" to the ancient, beautiful, and mysterious Bulgaria, often referred to by investors as the "undiscovered gem of Europe," included overnight stays in Sofia, Bansko, Pamporovo, Plovdiv, Veliko Turnovo, and Koprivshitsa—all centuries-old cities few Americans have heard of. The itinerary included singing workshops and dancing; scenic drives through four mountain ranges; and stops at spas, Thracian tombs, and monasteries. But the chief draw for most would be Bulgaria's folklore—dancing, singing, and eating with the festively-clad locals. Folklore, after all, was the heart and soul of Bulgaria.

I had known about Jim's folk tours since 1994, after attending writing workshops with him and reading his series of books on his travels, all entitled A New Leaf. "Folklore is alive and hidden in little-known countries such as Bulgaria, Slovakia, Bohemia, and Romania," he had written, "or along the less traveled paths of known countries like Greece, Turkey, Israel, and Italy." Someday I'd go with him, I always promised myself.

I ran into Jim in the fall of 2006. "We're going to Bulgaria next August," he said. "You should come!"

I hadn't been abroad in twenty years! *Why Bulgaria?*" I asked. I hadn't even been to Greece yet. For my first venture back into international travel, I'd rather go *there* than a former Communist-bloc country.

“Bulgaria is Greece without all the tourists,” he replied. “It’s still undiscovered.”

*Two weeks in undiscovered Bulgaria.* Was that like suggesting a European tourist spend their entire U.S. vacation in Kansas, just because it’s “undiscovered”?

He then added, “You can always go to Greece. Greece will be the same now as it will be ten years from now. *Now* is the time to go to Bulgaria, while it’s still magical and mysterious.”

Somehow, I couldn’t picture Bulgaria being magical and mysterious. The last time I’d visited a Communist country, the Soviet Union, was in 1979, with the Chicago Council on Foreign Relations. It was a great adventure but I recalled we were served lots of tasteless boiled food—boiled beef, boiled eggs and boiled potatoes--and the morning “coffee” was rationed and only served black. Would Bulgaria, a former Soviet satellite and an even poorer country, be the same, or worse?

Jim told me Bulgaria was one of his favorite destinations—this would be his ninth trip there. “It’s gorgeous, historic, has rich folklore, and wonderful people. It’s also the best bargain in Europe.”

*Magical. Mysterious. Undiscovered and inexpensive.* Perhaps I could be sold on Bulgaria.

My friends reacted the same way I had. “Bulgaria? Why Bulgaria?”

Few could place it on the map (somewhere between Siberia and Paris), and none could remember reading anything about Bulgaria, including travel trivia, in the New York Times travel section. All they could offer was that its stout, neckless weightlifters were always contenders at the summer Olympics.

Only László, the Hungarian upholsterer in town whose family fled Communism in the fifties, had an opinion on Bulgaria. “Bulgaria? It’s the armpit of the former Soviet empire. You’ll starve while you’re there. Go to Hungary instead.”

Fortunately, I struck up a conversation with a young Polish woman in a deli minutes later. Her face lit up when I told her I was thinking of going to Bulgaria.

“Bulgaria? It’s so beautiful there,” she said. “Many Europeans go there because of the beaches and the skiing. And the food is so delicious.”

Jim’s brochure emphasized food, folklore, and folk dancing. His description of the Pamporovo Resort was also enticing: “fresh mountain air and primeval pine forests—deep breathing strongly recommended.” The final days would be spent at the Koprivshtitsa Folk Festival, high in the Balkan mountains.

The trip sounded fun! But I recalled what Jim had written about his Mad Shoe travelers, “those who dance and function both on and off the beat, travelers who want to learn an 11/16<sup>th</sup> Bulgarian *kopanitsa*, a Greek *hasapicos*, a Romanian *briul* or anything similar.”

*Was I a Mad Shoe traveler?* I didn’t even know how to folk dance!

“All you need to be a Mad Shoe traveler,” he assured me, “is enthusiasm and an adventurous spirit.”

I did some research on the Internet. “Undiscovered” Bulgaria is roughly the size of Ohio, shares borders with Romania, Turkey, and Greece, has four seasons, and has everything (mountains, prairies, seashore) but deserts. It also became part of the European Union in January 2007.

European tourist bureaus consider it “the next Croatia” due to Europeans who flock there in the summer to soak in the sun along the two-hundred miles of Black Sea beaches, and return in the winter to ski at one of Bulgaria’s numerous ski resorts. The two most famous ones, Bansko and Pamporovo, were both on Jim’s itinerary. With four mountain ranges, Bulgaria, I read, had been a contender for the 2014 winter Olympics.

I asked my cousin Kelly, a professor of psychology at the University of Washington, if she’d be interested in going. Like me, she had never folk danced, but her enthusiasm and sense of adventure qualified her as a Mad Shoe tourist.

As we spoke on the phone, she was looking at Jim’s website and she laughed when she read the words, “Folk dancing promotes fun cell growth.”

For the fun factor alone, we both signed on for this midsummer adventure to the “magical and mysterious” Bulgaria. A friend from town, Lee, who had enjoyed Jim’s Monday night classes, also signed up. Known Greece would have to wait!

To prepare for the trip and get a sense of Eastern European music and dance, I attended Jim’s Monday night beginner folk dance classes, held in neighboring Englewood, New Jersey. Jim assured all the beginners that all we had to do was move in the same direction as the person on our right. All the veteran dancers were welcoming, and with their encouragement, and Jim’s “just do it” and “watch my feet” philosophy of teaching, I caught on quickly to the simple village dances. The music, a mix of sensual Israeli, Greek, Macedonian, Turkish, and Bulgarian dances, was wonderful.

The Bulgarian dances, with their irregular rhythms and fast crossing steps, were among the more challenging, but also the most exhilarating. My fun cells *were* growing with each passing week.

By August, I was transformed from eight months of folk dancing and eagerly awaited departure. Before departing, I had asked Jim about the best way to communicate with my college-age daughter while in Bulgaria. “It’s a seven-hour time difference. Barring an emergency, why would you want to call home while you’re on vacation?”

I’d never vacationed without my daughter. But he had a good point. I was on vacation in an exotic land. Every phone call and e-mail would take me out of it, back to New Jersey, even if only momentarily. So I gave her the list of hotels we’d be staying at and promised her an “I’ve arrived safely!” e-mail from Sofia.

On the day of departure, Jim awaited us at JFK airport, at the Air France’s check-in area. He gave each of us a Jim Gold International Tours tote bag with his motto “Travel Broadens One” emblazoned on the bag in gold letters. Inside was a copy of his latest book.

I also carried Lonely Planet’s Guide to Bulgaria. I had had every intention of reading it from cover to cover, learning the Cyrillic alphabet, and mastering common Bulgarian words and phrases before the trip. On the day we departed, I hadn’t even cracked open the book, and had only learned a few common phrases such as *blagodarya* (thank you).

Our group spent much of the afternoon getting acquainted and remarking on the fact that little-known Bulgaria had made the front page news much of the summer. Of most concern to us was the worst heat wave in European history, one still in progress that had left scores dead in Bulgaria and surrounding countries in the preceding weeks of 100 degree plus weather. Wildfires in the Bulgarian countryside were still out of control. Hopefully, we prayed, the heat wave would end before we arrived.

We came from all over the US and Canada. Thirteen were from the New York metropolitan area; others were active in folk dance groups from Colorado, Pennsylvania, North Carolina, Tennessee, Minnesota, Oklahoma, and Montana. Although Bulgaria was still a mystery to me, many in the group were familiar with the songs, the musical instruments, and the dances of the country. Half of the group had traveled with Jim before. Margie Bohn, a retired mapmaker from Milwaukee, and Odette and King Sinclair, a nurse and a research chemist from North Carolina, had been to

Greece with him the previous fall. My seatmate on the plane, Paul Kerlee, a retired musicologist, told me he's been on at least twenty trips with Jim, including Jim's first trip to Bulgaria.

In the airport I met Ilana Bar-Or and Rod Frehlich from the Boulder, Colorado folk dancers group. She told me that two others--Polly Reetz and Beverly Elinoff—were from Denver and belonged to a performing group called “One World Folk Dancers.” Balkan, Lebanese, Israeli, and Croatian folk dances are their specialty.

Toba Goddard, from West Sacramento, California, sings Eastern European folk music with a group of thirteen women called “Zado.” Elenita Brown, a professor of design at the University of Montana, runs a summer dance camp with her daughter at their Montana horse ranch; her specialty is Flamencan dance. Elaine Sohn, an educator from Brooklyn, and Emily Rosenberg, a psychiatrist at the VA Hospital in Oklahoma City, were among the many on the trip who teach folk dancing. Emily, who's also a distance runner, dances twice a week. “Folk dancing is very therapeutic,” she said. “I always tell my patients that depression can't hit a moving target.” She planned to run the marathon in Greece after her Greek trip with Jim in October 2007.

There were also a number of instrumental musicians on the trip. In Sofia, we met up with Lonna Whipple, from Colfax, California, who plays fiddle in a group called Star Thistle. She had arrived in Bulgaria two weeks earlier for the Bulgarian Folk Seminar in Plovdiv. There she studied the *gadulka*, a Bulgarian stringed instrument.

Hudi Brenman, also from northern California, plays accordion and clarinet in a Bay-area klezmer band. In the past, he has attended weeklong Balkan music camps in California and New York. While in Bulgaria, he planned to purchase Bulgarian instruments, including a *gaida* (Bulgarian bagpipe) and a *tamboura* (guitar), for both himself and his musician friends.

Janet Epstein and Carol VanderWal both dance in Nashville. Janet, a professional flutist and Carol, a lawyer, have both been dancing for over twenty years. Carol was interested in the sacred circle dance called *paneurythmy*, a dance that originated in Bulgaria.

Jim Gold is a professional musician as well. Classically trained in the violin and guitar, he's also an amateur *gaida* player and often plays during the break at dancing class. He brought his own *gaida* on the trip, and like Hudi, hoped to purchase a new one in Bulgaria.

I also spoke with a few of the non-dancers, including Ed Dollinger, a retired lawyer from Cliffside Park, New Jersey, and author of five suspense novels. Ed's wife, Ruth, however, had folk

danced years ago. Like Kelly, who had never folk danced in her life, Ed had every intention of “joining the dance” on the trip.

The next morning, after an overnight flight and an eventful plane change in Paris, we were met by our guide, Stefan Gendjov, and driver, Pero Simov, at the new, modern Sofia International Airport. The sky was clear, the temperature in the seventies, and puddles filled the cracks between the cobblestones. A torrential downpour, while we were airborne, had ended seven weeks of drought, heat, and wildfires in Bulgaria.

Enroute to our 5-star Radisson SAS Hotel, located in the heart of the ancient city of Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria since 1879, we passed dozens of stark, gray cinderblock Soviet-era tenements in various stages of decay on the outskirts of town. The only apparent color came from the flower baskets and freshly washed clothes hanging from the balconies of these tenements, and the vivid graffiti on their walls. As our bus drove down Vassil Levsky Boulevard, we passed a massive monument to Soviet soldiers and even more massive government buildings erected during Soviet times. My seatmate whispered under her breath, “This is beautiful Bulgaria?”

Those first impressions were short-lived, however; we soon reached our modern hotel overlooking Parliament Square, across from which stood two impressive landmarks, one the white Parliament building, the other the newly regilded, gold-domed Alexander Nefsky Cathedral and Crypt, considered the most spectacular building in Sofia, one which can hold 7,000 people. On our walking tour later that evening, we’d learn that the impressive statue in the middle of the square, of a man on a horse, was a monument to the Russian Tsar Nicholas II, whose troops liberated Bulgaria from five centuries of Turkish domination in 1878.

Our Bulgarian adventure had begun!

Our tour included breakfast and dinner, but we were on our own for lunch. Famished, Kelly and I ventured out onto the cobblestone streets and found a small cafeteria with four long tables near the hotel. The sign outside, in Cyrillic letters, said Hawemo Mehlo. Dozens of Bulgarian dishes were on display behind the glass—a dozen salads, soups, vegetables, rice dishes, and a variety of grilled meats. We pointed to the *Shopska* salad, *tarator* (a chilled yogurt and cucumber soup), and *kebabcheta* (juicy grilled sausages), which we later learned were Bulgarian specialties. The Shopska

salad would have been sufficient—the plate overflowed with diced cucumbers, juicy red tomatoes, and sweet onions topped with *kashkaval*, grated yellow cheese.

The place was packed. We approached a lone woman diner at a table and asked, using hand gestures, if we could sit with her. She smiled and shook her head back and forth, as if she were saying ‘no.’ For a moment I was taken aback; then I recalled something Jim had told us in dance class—that Bulgarian head movements are the opposite of ours. When they mean yes, they move their head from side to side. When they mean no, they nod up and down. When we finally realized she meant yes, we all laughed and smiled, sat down, and ate our first Bulgarian meal among Bulgarians. It was sensational in its simplicity.

After lunch, we set out on our mission to find an Internet café. Our hotel had two computers with Internet connections, but both were in use and cost \$20 per day to access. “Let’s just find one in town,” I suggested to Kelly. “It will be our first Bulgarian adventure.”

What an adventure it was, one that took us down a warren of rutted cobblestone streets, past hundreds of shops, outdoor cafes, magazine and used book kiosks, colorful open-air produce markets, kebab stands, pizzerias, even a McDonald’s. (But no Starbucks!) Most signs, except for the universally known ones such as Coca-Cola, Pepsi, and Tuborg beer, were in Cyrillic, but the display of wares in every storefront window made its purpose apparent.

Bulgarian women, all fashionably dressed, strolled arm in arm, chatting and smiling. Friendly cats and dogs wandered freely through the city. Old men played chess in the parks. The city was bustling with life and entrepreneurial activity, not at all what I’d expected! I thought it would resemble the Moscow I’d visited in 1979, where unlabeled tin cans filled display windows, and women in black dresses and babushkas stood in line for hours to buy a loaf of bread, a sack of potatoes, or a cut of meat.

We asked a dozen teens, all dressed similar to their western counterparts, where we could find the Internet cafe.

“Eezveniteh (Excuse me). *Kaday* is Internet café?” Most Bulgarian questions begin with the letter k—koy (who), kakvo (what), koga (when), and kday (where).

“Een-ter-net café?” they’d respond, looking puzzled.

“*Da! Tryab* (I need) e-mail,” I replied.

A few seemed to understand what we sought and used a combination of hand gestures and Bulgarian words to point us in the “right” direction. Unfortunately, we only knew how to ask simple

questions. We didn't know the words they used to respond to our questions, words such as "right," "left," and "straight ahead five blocks."

After an hour of wandering block after cobblestoned block, dodging wild drivers as we went, we finally found the elusive Internet Game Room a few blocks off the central pedestrian mall Ulitsa Pirotska. It was located on the third floor of a heavily graffiti-ed five-story walkup building. We gave the English-speaking hostess a Bulgarian *lev* (about sixty cents), and she led us through a hot, dark, smoky cavern lit up only by the neon screens of at least a hundred flat-screen monitors, to a vacant workstation. The smoke-filled room was so oppressive that I took time only to type, I'm in Sofia, Bulgaria, in the only Internet café in town. See you in two weeks! Love Mom. I pressed the Send button and fled the smoky room.

*E-mail mission accomplished!* Now we just had to find our way back to the Radisson Hotel in time for our first group walking tour, and dinner. We should have used breadcrumbs to mark our rail, we joked, for the natives looked just as puzzled when we asked, "Eez-ven-ee-the. Ka-day is the Radisson Kho-tel?"

"Rah-dee-sohn?"

"*Da!* Rah-dee-sohn!" We were jet lagged and punchy by then, lamenting that we hadn't brought a city map along for our solo flight. We gave all we approached a sincere *Blagodarya* and a smile. Ultimately we found our way back by recalling unusual storefronts and landmarks.

The Radisson SAS was first class in every way. When we met for dinner at the local Victoria restaurant, our group all remarked about the hotel's luxurious bathrooms. I laughed and remembered what Jim had told me about his first "humbling" folk tour to Hungary twenty-five years before. He had assumed his tourists had signed up primarily to participate in the folk culture—the music and the dancing. He hadn't given a thought to the food, transportation, or accommodations. He'd learned quickly, however, that folk tourists expect top-notch hotels, clean bathrooms, comfortable air-conditioned buses, and delicious food with the folklore. He'd listened.

More impressive than the bathrooms was the Radisson's breakfast buffet. It was sumptuous! I had been up since 3 a.m., reading, writing, and drinking fresh coffee in the hotel lobby. I had read that Bulgarian yogurt, *kiselo mliako*, is considered the best in the world by yogurt aficionados.

At six, the receptionist brought out a basket of freshly baked, still warm, *banitsa*, flaky pastries stuffed with Bulgarian feta cheese. (Bulgarians claim their feta cheese is also the best!) The

buffet, fit for a king, opened at seven and included homemade yoghurt, honey on the comb, fresh muesli, baskets of freshly baked bread, smoked fish, omelets, hot breakfast meats, sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, a dozen types of cheeses, cold cuts, olives, fresh fruit juices, French pastries, and espresso coffee. I hadn't seen any folk culture yet, but based on the food alone, I already loved Bulgaria!

The unique nature of our group did not become evident until we dined in the garden of the Bor Restaurant, on the outskirts of Sofia, located in a pine forest at the entrance of the Vitosha Mountain National Park. Nearby was the scenic Vladaya gorge.

Earlier in the day, Ilana from Denver had asked Jim if we could invite Daniela Ivanova, a well-known Bulgarian dance instructor and choreographer who had given a dance seminar in Denver, to dinner. Daniela lived in Sofia.

“Invite her!” Jim replied.

Just minutes after taking our places at the tables, the live music (accordion and keyboard) and folk dance entertainment (four young dancers in folk costume) began. After a half hour of energetic dancing, the young performers, but not the old musicians, took a break. The dance floor was finally free.

Daniela, who resembled a goddess with her upswept hair and her hand-designed-and-sewn white chiffon gown, arose from her table and began to dance a *pravo horo*. Within seconds, half our group was on the dance floor, hands joined. All knew the music, and the steps. Jim extended a hand to my cousin Kelly, who had never folk-danced, and she happily pushed aside her Shopska salad to join the merriment. The others needed no prompting. As I watched in amazement, our group morphed into Mad Shoe travelers as they joined hands and danced a lively *kopanitza*. It was just as Jim had described them in his book!

At one point, all cheered on Odette, the nurse from Kentucky who was recovering from multiple broken bones and used a cane as she hobbled down Sofia's cobblestone streets. Using her cane for support, even she led a dance at the Bor Restaurant!

Our group occupied half the tables in the restaurant's outdoor garden. A multi-generational group of Bulgarians celebrating a birthday had pulled the remaining tables together for their party. Daniela beckoned to them to join us; several, including the children and their grannies, left their broiled trout and *kebabcha* behind to dance and sing with us. Young and old--all danced with Mad

Shoes! I recalled reading these words from Jim's book. "*Folk dancing with others is collective ecstasy.*" How true!

"Where are you from?" the Bulgarian woman holding my right hand asked in heavily-accented English. By then, the entire room, Americans and Bulgarians, on its feet, undulating in unison, resembled a giant glowworm.

She expressed surprise, not only that we were from America, but that we knew Bulgarian folk dances and the words to their songs. She would not be the first. Every place we visited, the locals were impressed and proud that we shared a love of their folk culture.

Nobody wanted to leave! Jim had to drag us away from the dance floor at the Bor Restaurant since we had a full day coming up.

"I could have danced all night!" Kelly told me later, on the bus ride back to the hotel. I had kept telling her that folk dancing was fun, but she'd been skeptical. Finally she "just did it."

We took several historic walking tours while in Sofia. Bulgaria's history is so rich, and so old, that our jet-lagged minds were overwhelmed. Within a three-hour period, we passed twentieth-century Turkish baths, religious murals painted between the tenth and fourteenth centuries, Roman aqueducts from the second century, the former Royal Palace built in the nineteenth, the nine-domed Archaeological Museum from the fifteenth century, and two ancient churches. St. Sofia Church, which dates back to the fifth century, is the oldest Eastern Orthodox Church in Sofia. St. George Rotunda, set among the excavation of ancient Roman ruins, dates back to the fourth century. Just blocks away stood Sofia's only surviving mosque (1576). Also nearby was the Sofia Synagogue (1909), the largest Sephardic one in Europe. Somehow all had survived centuries of wars, pillage, and plunder.

Bulgarian people somehow survived all the upheavals as well. Modern Bulgaria has around eight million people. Of that, eighty-five percent are Bulgarian, nine percent Turkish and six percent are a mix of Roma (gypsies), Jews, or Greeks. The primary religion is Bulgarian Orthodox (87%) followed by Muslim (13%). Although Jews make up less than one-tenth percent of the Bulgarian population, we learned that Bulgaria was the only Eastern European country that had protected its 50,000 Jews from being sent to the death camps in World War II--an astounding feat considering that Bulgaria was allied with the Nazis during that war. (In Western Europe, Norway spirited all of its Jewish population out of the country.)

I noticed that the most historic of buildings had fresh coats of paint, while other buildings were in various states of disrepair—crumbling stucco and peeling paint. Stefan said a “Beautify Bulgaria” initiative was underway throughout the country. The EU was financing the preservation of the most historic museums, homes, and churches. They were also providing funds to repave the most traveled roads, repair the infrastructure in the cities, and to develop Bulgaria’s tourism industry.

Walking back to the hotel on Tsar Osvoboditel Boulevard, we passed dozens of souvenir stalls. Colorful wooden dishes, pottery, and religious icons were most prevalent, although a few had antique jewelry, watches, and coins on display alongside moth-eaten Nazi uniforms and tattered military medals. Jim had told us, if we saw something we liked, to get it.

“Don’t think you’ll get a better deal later in the trip. You may never find it again.” So I bought several carved wooden plates, each with a unique pattern and painted in bright colors. I never saw them sold anywhere again.

Jim had also told us that this was our trip. Although he provided a full itinerary, we as individuals could do whatever we liked, as long as we were on the bus when we left for the next city. I liked this philosophy, because I could leave the tour if I found something of interest along the way. My first time doing so was near the end of our walking tour in Sofia, when we passed a large group of older men chanting outside a government building. I paused to take in the scene. What were they protesting? One of the men, seeing my interest, approached me and asked if I spoke English.

“I do,” I replied.

“Where are you from?” he asked.

“America.”

He shook my hand, introduced himself as Christo, told me he was seventy and a retired engineer and pilot. He told me he used to speak English all the time, for business, but his had gotten rusty. “No one to practice with,” he lamented.

“I am on a pension now,” he said, “and my pension is \$118 (US) per month! How can anyone live on that? It barely puts bread and milk on the table!”

He told me that pensioners gathered every Wednesday at eleven a.m. outside the government office. “When we first started protesting, there were thousands of us. Now we’re down to this.” He went on to say he and his wife scrub floors in office buildings several days a week to survive. “This would never have happened under Communism,” he told me. “I’m not saying things were perfect under Communism,” he continued, “but we never had homelessness then.”

“So many factories have closed down, and our educated youth are leaving the country,” he continued. “There are no industrial jobs here to keep them here. The leaders are corrupt. It’s a mess! Go home and tell people what’s going on in Bulgaria.”

I was no fan of Communism but kept my opinions to myself. Communism provided security, but robbed humans of initiative and desire. The transition to democracy for all of Eastern Europe, especially after years of being “taken care of from cradle to grave,” would take time for these brave Bulgarians. And it would be uncomfortable. Clearly, it would be the next generation of Bulgarians who benefitted from democracy. Being admitted to the European Union would be a step in the right direction. Millions would be invested in Bulgaria’s infrastructure and historic monuments.

I had told Christo we were on a folk tour, that many in our group were folk dancers. “Our final destination is the Koprivshitsa Festival.”

“*Koprivshitsa*? The Communists started the Koprivshitsa Festival in 1965. They’re the ones who kept our folk traditions alive!” Christo told me. “They provided money to the local villages to form singing groups, and they paid for the transportation to folk festivals, both in Bulgaria and abroad. Now there’s no more money for the arts, for these festivals, or for old people!”

Bulgaria had replaced Communism with democracy over fifteen years ago, in 1989. Despite what Christo said about the decline of the arts, Jim had told me that the last Koprivshitsa Festival, held in 2005, was the biggest ever, with 15,000 performers and 250,000 guests. “It was an unforgettable experience,” he told me.

Bulgaria is a land where traces of ten civilizations have been discovered. These include the first pre-historic civilizations in Europe, Thracian, Macedonian, Greek, Roman, Persian, Slav, Bulgar, Byzantine and Islam cultures. Traders, invaders, and crusaders have come and gone, leaving death and destruction in their wake. Modern Bulgaria is built on the artifact-filled rubble left behind.

We visited the National History Museum outside Sofia, one of the largest on the Balkan Peninsula, home to many of these artifacts. Over 650,000 exhibits (22,000 on display) span six thousand years of Bulgarian history.

We were fortunate to see the world-famous collection of fourth-century B.C. Thracian gold treasures, which had just returned from Switzerland in July, and would be leaving for Japan in October. Delicate crowns of oak leaves, stunning necklaces and earrings, a king’s mask, rosettes from horse’s harnesses--all solid gold, discovered by farmers in their gardens and fields. A museum

guard who spoke English told me the Discovery Channel was producing a two-hour documentary on the Thracian gold civilization and the work of Bulgarian museums and archaeologists. National Geographic had also published an article in December 2006 entitled “Bulgaria’s Gold Rush.” It referred to Bulgaria as El Dorado due to its vast trove of buried gold treasures.

The museum was the palatial estate of former Communist dictator Todor Zhivkov, who held court there for twenty-seven years. Its sweeping staircases, floor-to-ceiling glass windows overlooking the Vitosha Mountain, grand ballrooms with ornately carved wooden ceilings and immense crystal chandeliers, and an even grander terrace out back with sunken pools and fountains told a telling story about the years under Communist rule. Other reminders included a couple of Soviet MiG fighter jets outside.

Instead of long lines around the block waiting to see this spectacular exhibit, we were among the few visitors in the museum, one “off the beaten path” in a city and country equally off the beaten tourist path.

We saw much of Sofia in two short days. While sipping a beer in an outdoor café at the end of our second day, I made a mental note of what I hadn’t seen: long lines of tourists, pigeons and squirrels, swarms of begging children, bicycles and mopeds, and mothers pushing children in strollers. Cobblestones in various states of disrepair make this city daunting for strollers, bicycles, wheelchairs, and those not steady on their feet.

Our trip was full of surprises and serendipities, and veterans of Jim Gold folk tours claim that’s why they travel with him. Paul Kerlee, the retired musicologist from New York, who had been on Jim’s first trip to Bulgaria, carries his tape recorder whenever he travels with Jim “because you just never know what surprises he has up his sleeve.”

Kerlee had his tape recorder on hand when we visited the quaint village of Kovachevtsi to attend a singing workshop with Kremena Stancheva, a soloist with the famous woman’s group “Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares.” (One Mystery, Many Voices). The group began recording in the eighties, and their second recording, in 1990, won a Grammy. This ensemble of twenty-four women got its start in 1952, when the father of Bulgarian concert folk music, Philip Koutev, founded the Bulgarian State Radio and Television Female Vocal Choir, made up of the best singers from the rural regions of Bulgaria. The songs these descendents of the legendary Orpheus sing are known for their striking harmonies, exciting rhythmic effects, and haunting melodies. In fact, one popular and

haunting Rhodopa folksong, "Izlel e Delyu Haidutin," sung by Valya Balkanska, was part of the Voyager Golden Record selection of music included in the two Voyager spacecraft launched in 1977.

Upon arriving in Kovachevtsi, our bus was met by a welcoming party led by the energetic, octogenarian Yagoda, its proud mayor for the past twelve years. Barely four feet tall, she gave Jim a "welcome back" hug and began eagerly conversing with him.

Before each trip, Jim studies the language of the country, just so he can banter like this with the locals, who clearly love him for making the good-natured attempt at conversation. He's studied over thirty languages since starting his tour business twenty-five years ago. Even though he's been to Bulgaria eight times, he began taking private Bulgarian lessons again, back in January. Weeks before departure, he e-mailed all his tourists a list of common Bulgarian words and phrases, including *blagodarya* (thank you), *eez-ven-ee-teh* (excuse me), *dobar den* (good afternoon), *dobro utro* (good day morning) and *otlitchno* (excellent!).

Wearing a cornflower blue dress that matched her eyes, the chatty Mayor Yagoda, which means "strawberry," led us down the dusty cobblestone streets, past groups of curious Roma teens hanging out in the town square, to the local community center, where Kremena awaited us for our singing workshop.

Inside, we met the dignified Kremena, her long black hair swept back off her face, still as strikingly beautiful as she appeared in a dated concert poster that hung in the auditorium. Her twenty-year old son, who attends university in Sofia, and her nephew, a London investment banker on holiday, took turns translating.

She spoke about the unique sound produced by Bulgarian singers, one that originates in the throat. She also said that Bulgarian singers were known for their range and their polyphonic harmonies.

She then demonstrated the mystery of the Bulgarian voice by singing folk songs from the seven folklore regions in Bulgaria: Rodopo, Macedonian, Shopska, Thracian, northern Bulgaria, northeast Bulgaria, and Strandja (eastern Thracian region). It was one thing for her to talk about "the mystery of the Bulgarian voice." It was quite another to hear it! Kremena's powerful, haunting voice was awe-inspiring; it sent shivers through our collective spines.

Between songs, she described them. “Our songs are about village life,” she said, “the rituals of courtship, marriage, working in the fields, raising children, and coping with life’s challenges. The primary theme, however, is *love*.”

Although our Ventzy accompanied her on a few songs, she noted that, historically, Bulgarian songs were sung *a cappella*, without instrumental accompaniment.

“Our voices served as instruments at weddings and holiday gatherings in small villages. The use of musical instruments as an accompaniment to the dance is relatively recent in Bulgaria.” (In traditional Bulgaria, only men play musical instruments.)

Keeping the singing tradition alive in a country where teens are increasingly drawn toward *chalga* (Bulgarian folk/pop) is one of Kremena’s goals at her School of Folklore. She then introduced two of her most promising singing students, “the next generation of Bulgarian folk singers.” Eight-year-old Denislav studies drums and voice at the state music school and spends his summers at Kremena’s school. Sixteen-year-old Galia has studied voice at Kremena’s School of Folklore for ten years. Both were dressed in vibrant orange, blue, white, and black folk costumes of their area of the Pirins. Their clear, powerful young voices were astonishing and even more so when they sang as a duo, with electrifying harmony.

After the singing workshop, our group was led back to Kremena’s singing school, formerly her grandfather’s tavern, where we took seats at one of the tables that overflowed with dishes of food. The room was festively decorated with wall hangings, rugs, and folk costumes.

After Kremena’s husband Ivan toasted the group, *Nazdrava!*, we enjoyed a delicious, traditional Bulgarian lunch of *kavarma* meatballs, boiled *kartofi* (potatoes), *pulneni shushski* (peppers stuffed with cheese), bread, yogurt and Bulgarian wine. We learned that Kremena’s family and neighbors helped make it; it had taken a week to prepare all the food! We were overwhelmed by the hospitality, graciousness, and generosity of Kremena’s family and the townspeople, who kept bringing more dishes to the table. A true Bulgarian Thanksgiving! Afterwards, we sat on her front lawn, chatting as best we could with the locals, under the shade of the walnut trees.

“Do you have time to see our ancient sacred trees?” Mayor Yagoda asked as we headed to the bus. “They’re over five hundred years old and the other pride of our town.” We didn’t have time, Stefan apologized. Our next stop, he told us, would be a highlight of the trip—the Rila Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage site nestled in the scenic Rila Mountain.

Stefan noted that, while western Europe was busy building castles for their rulers, Bulgaria had built monasteries to not only protect the locals from invaders, but also to educate them, and preserve the Bulgarian language, religion, culture, traditions and spirit through the five dark centuries under the Ottoman empire. These monasteries, which were built in remote areas in the mountains, were refuges for monks, mystics, artists, and Bulgarian freedom fighters. In the libraries of monasteries the books were written and re-written. For those who couldn't read, the stories were painted on the walls.

The Rila Monastery, which had just reopened in June 2007 after undergoing eight months of renovation, was spectacular. It is the most famous, "the jewel in the crown," of Bulgaria's 160 monasteries, and is known as the country's spiritual and cultural temple. More than 70,000 people visited in 2006.

It was founded in the tenth century by the famous monk Ivan Rilski, and has four levels of colorful balconies with 300 rooms (cells) for monks or visitors, as well as kitchens, a hospital, chapels, and even a winery. The courtyard has several stone water fountains, which produced a continuous flow of delicious, cold mountain water directly from the local streams. Bulgaria is one of the few European countries where the local water is not only delicious, but can be drunk without consequences.

In the center of the courtyard is a domed church painted with rich, colorful murals, most signed by the Revival artist Zahari Zograph in 1844. One scene depicted people bound for heaven, painted on the right, and those bound for hell, painted on the left. It caused a scandal when painted, for members of the aristocracy appeared on the left.

We were there in the late afternoon, after most of the crowds were gone. A pony-tailed monk, adorned in a heavy, brown, horsehair robe, walked counter-clockwise around the courtyard banging a gong with a wooden mallet, announcing the evening service. For us, his gong signaled that it was time to get back on the bus, time to head for the charming fifteenth-century village of Bansko.

According to the Ski Club of Britain, Bansko, population 10,000, is the "best developed ski resort in Eastern Europe," and an article in the Daily Mail described it "as the hottest new ski resort on the planet." To get there, we'd have to drive along the wickedly twisting Iskar River and cross Bulgaria's two highest mountains, the Rila and the Pirin.

I was sitting in the back of the bus, scribbling notes and pointing out all the storks in their nests to my seatmate. I suddenly felt nauseated, said so, and was handed a bag in the nick of time. Apparently I wasn't the only one. When we stopped for a much needed break at Lake Iskar, Jim made a decision to reserve the first two rows on the bus for "cochlear-challenged" travelers. What a difference that made on the rest of the trip, to have a landscape to focus upon!

Real estate signs and billboards announcing investment opportunities, all in English, lined the road to Bansko. The British, it seems, have discovered beautiful, undiscovered, and inexpensive Bulgaria, and they're the ones investing in the ski resorts, sunning themselves on Bulgaria's Black Sea beaches, purchasing abandoned country homes (many desperate Bulgarians left their villages and moved to Sofia for jobs), and making plans to convert fallow fields into golf courses.

After checking into our 4-star Orpheus hotel in Bansko, we met downstairs for dinner—a buffet. Soon after dessert, Jim headed for the dance floor, extending his hand to others to join him. This time, we had our own musician and dance instructor; on our last day in Sofia, Ventzy Andonov and Iglia Andonova had joined our group. Ventzy, a master *gaida* player, would be our resident musician for the next ten days; his wife Iglia, would teach us new dance steps. With them on board, our group could dance whenever the dancing spirit moved us, *and we did*, accompanied by Ventzy until after ten. Iglia taught us the dance steps for the *Vatuliško horo* and the *paiduško*.

Energized by the dancing, Kelly and I headed to the town square afterwards. Stefan told us Bansko was a weekend destination for well-off Bulgarians who enjoyed relaxing in one of the town's 180 old-style *mehanas* (taverns). That Friday night, the outdoor cafes around Bansko's town square were jammed with visitors enjoying an outdoor concert and a late-night dinner. The star attraction on the stage was Gergana, a voluptuous blonde Bulgarian *chalga* star. *Chalga* is wildly popular with young people in the Balkan countries, in large part due to the female singers with names such as Gloriya, Ivana, Kamelia, and Aneliya, who vigorously shake their hips, and more, while they sing.

The teenagers were lined up behind the outdoor stage, hoping to get Gergana's autograph and a photo when the concert was over. She smilingly obliged and spent nearly an hour meeting and greeting her adoring fans (surrounded by five burly bodyguards).

On our walking tour the next day, Stefan told us that Bansko is home to 120 cultural monuments. It sits just outside the Pirin National Park, which is also a World Heritage Site. It's also

one of Bulgaria's fourteen "museum towns," towns where the National Revival architectural style from the late 1800s is preserved. If one wants to build a new house or restore an existing house, the architecture must correspond to the historical time when the town was developed. We would visit eight museum towns on our trip, he told us.

Although we don't call them "museum towns", U.S. equivalents might include Oak Park, Illinois (Frank Lloyd Wright homes), Ocean Grove, New Jersey (Victorian), and Nantucket Island off Massachusetts (austere, gray New England-style).

The well-manicured cobblestone streets of Bansko stood in sharp contrast to the crumbling ones in Sofia. It was clear that, whatever money the EU was investing in its "Beautify Bulgaria" initiative, was going to the areas most appealing to outside investors. Bansko, with its gorgeous mountain setting, impressive wooden homes built in the unique National Revival style, inviting wooden *mehanas* with home-cooked food, summer music festivals in the town square, and active night life was clearly one of the most appealing.

In the past, he added, clans had hidden from the Turks in this remote village. We got a sense of how life was lived during the five centuries of resistance against Turkish rule, for walking through Bansko was like being in a maze—narrow, twisting cobblestone streets flanked by high, thick stone walls that provided a degree of protection for those living in the homes within.

The heart of Bansko is the Holy Trinity Church, built in 1835. It reminded me of Capistrano, with hundreds of swallows circling the belfry and clock tower. The church is famous for its collection of icons and murals painted by local Bansko artists who once made the Bansko School of Painting one of the best in Bulgaria. Birds, symbolizing the Holy Spirit, were well represented inside the church--hundreds of carved wooden doves lined the walls. Recordings of chanting monks resonated in the cavernous space. One of our travelers, Bruce Bush, explained much of the symbolism to me.

The church was filled with tall, stringy candles; for a *lev*, you could purchase one, light it, and say a prayer. One type of candle was for the living; a second type for the dead. Instead of pews, Bulgarian Orthodox churches have narrow chairs built into the perimeter of the church. These, Bruce told me, are only for the aged and infirm, or those deep in meditation. Most Bulgarians stand during services. The few we spoke with admitted that most Bulgarians rarely attend church services. Martin, a security guard I'd struck up a conversation with in Sofia, asked me why Americans feel the

need to attend church every week. “We Bulgarians are spiritual people, but we don’t see the need to always be in church.”

On our walking tour, two American backpackers approached Jim and asked if he knew about a folk festival being held on the outskirts of town. They had waited over an hour for the scheduled shuttle bus. Jim said he wasn’t aware of it and then jokingly complimented them on their English and asked where they’d learned it. When the pair told him they were Americans, and that they taught folk dancing at the Greenlake Folk Dancers Club in Seattle, Jim invited them to join the *Jim Gold Folk Festival du jour*: a visit to the singing *Dobarski Babi* and later, folk dancing atop the Pirin Mountain. They happily accepted and agreed to meet us at the hotel later in the day. *Remarkably*, these two were the only Americans we encountered in Bulgaria!

After the walking tour, Kelly and I agreed to split a salad in one of Bansko’s charming *mehanas*. How to choose, for all were festively decorated, floor to ceiling, with multi-colored rugs and weavings, and all had huge menus! We selected one with entrees listed in both English and Bulgarian.

“Which salad do you recommend?” we asked, for over a dozen types were listed. The waitress pointed to the Master Salad, which we ordered along with two bottles of Kamenitza beer. The Master Salad, we soon learned, was enough for six people, or a very hungry master; it was a cornucopia of roasted peppers and eggplants, *snezhanka* (thick yogurt and pickled cucumbers), sliced cucumbers and tomatoes, Bulgarian feta, olives, pickled vegetables--all artistically arranged on a colorful Bulgarian platter. Our “light lunch” came to under \$3 each.

Bulgaria is worth visiting just for the good, plentiful, inexpensive, and delicious home-cooked food, washed down by local beer and wine. We toured it in early August, at the height of the harvest, when the tomatoes were the reddest, sweetest, and juiciest—and served at room temperature with every meal. All the vegetables and fruits are grown organically, primarily because Bulgarian farmers can’t afford pesticides.

After lunch, we boarded our bus and headed to “the mysterious village of Dobarsko” for a private performance by the *Dobarski Babi* (singing grandmothers). *What’s so mysterious about Dobarsko?* we all asked Jim, enroute. “Some things are too mysterious to discuss,” is all he’d say.

Dobarsko, a village with two hundred houses, is nestled between three mountain ranges—the Pirins, the Rhodopes (birthplace of the legendary Orpheus), and the Rilas. Stefan told us it had been settled by Bulgarian soldiers who’d been defeated in 1018 by the Byzantines and then maimed (only

one good eye for every 100 men) by their victors. The village is so small, it's not mentioned in the guidebooks, but it's home to one historic church--the Church of St. Theodore Tiron and Theodore Stratilat--built in 1614, but repeatedly restored since then.

We passed this church, which didn't look like much from the bus, for like many churches in Bulgaria, it was built low, almost beneath the surface of the ground, with no glistening gold domes, tall steeples, or vaulting arches. While the whole of southeastern Europe was under the Muslim rule of the Ottoman Empire, churches had to be built lower than neighboring mosques or risk annihilation. They compensated for their austere exteriors with stunning interiors filled with colorful frescoes. We'd see examples of these later on our trip, in Arbanassi, a museum town (population 500) with seven churches that mysteriously survived centuries of plundering and pillaging by Turkish troops.

But back to the mysterious village of Dobarsko... where two smiling, wrinkled *babi*, all decked out in their vibrant red, white, and green folk dresses, and multi-colored wool knee socks, awaited us at the entrance to the village. Jim jumped off the bus to greet them and was soon engulfed in their outstretched arms and cries of "Jeem!" Grabbing his hand, they led us, smiling wide the entire time, by foot, through the village to a private home behind walls. There, ten more colorfully clad and smiling *babi* extended a traditional Bulgarian welcome of *pogacha* and *chubritsa* (homemade bread dipped in savoury, a blend of salt and local herbs). A sprig of wild geranium to place over our ears completed the greeting, as well as *ajran*, a homemade yogurt drink to wash down the bread. The spokeswoman for the effervescent Dobarski Babi told us, through our translator Stefan, that they've won numerous gold medals at Bulgarian folk festivals, and for that reason their nickname was "the Golden Girls!"

Before long, the *babi*, whose ages ranged from seventy to perhaps a hundred, began singing their village folk songs, and once again we were treated to the mysteries of the Bulgarian voice, in twelve-part harmony, full of wild yips and ecstatic yowls. Many a gold tooth flashed as they joyfully executed their repertoire on the veranda, then joined hands with us to dance a *Rodopsko horo*. Soon the whole veranda was filled with dancers.

For the finale, two of our own, Julia and Alex, donned costumes to engage in a traditional marriage ceremony, which included many gulps of the local *rakia*, a potent plum brandy. For the "grand finale," the *babi* asked us to sing traditional American songs. It only took seconds for our group to break out in "Oh, Susannah," a song that the *Mystery Voices of Bulgaria* had recorded. The

*babi* knew it and joyfully sang along. They were less familiar with the next two-- “She’ll Be Comin’ Round the Mountain” and “I’ve Been Working on the Railroad”--but they smiled, clapped their hands and tapped their feet as we sang. Music clearly was the universal language!

*What a day!* we all exclaimed, eating freshly washed plums that an elderly village man offered us as we headed back to our bus.

Minutes after we left Dobarsko, it began to drizzle. How fortunate we were that the much-needed rain waited until after our charmed visit to mysterious Dobarsko had concluded!

As we headed back to Bansko, the drizzle morphed into a steady downpour, and a few expressed concern that our Friday night “picnic at Chalin’s Farm” might be rained out. Stefan and Jim said we’d wait until six before making any decisions.

Bulgaria, no doubt, needed the rain after seven weeks of drought. But hundreds of tourists and vendors were headed to Bansko for the Bansko Jazz Festival, all praying for clear skies. And the weather gods listened. Just before six, after three hours of soaking rain, dazzling bright rays of sun broke through the storm clouds, which mysteriously disappeared within minutes. It was if a heavy curtain had drawn back, revealing a glistening set on a magical stage. Our picnic was on!

And what a picnic! Our bus ascended the winding, mountain road through the sun-kissed clouds until the road went no further. After climbing off the bus, we followed Jim on a path through an enchanted, primeval pine forest, inhaling the fresh Pirin mountain air and remarking on the millions of glistening water droplets hanging from the pine needles. *Acres of diamonds!* Finally, we reached the summit of a grassy mountain clearing that, when it emerged from the mist, it caught us by surprise. The view was beyond breathtaking!

We were met at the top of the clearing by a welcome party of three male musicians, who festively played the accordion, *tupan*, (drum) and clarinet, while two women, in full folk costume, extended the traditional welcome of bread, salt, and wild geranium leaves. Two men offered a sip of *rakia* from a metal pot. The wonderful smell of grilling *kebabche* beckoned us to make our way cautiously down the wet clearing, toward the wooden huts, where our Chalin’s Farm picnic dinner would soon be served. A group of Dutch tourists arrived shortly after us. The musicians followed us down the mountain, playing continuously as we took our seats at the tables. When the two women began singing the beautiful Macedonian song *Ako Umram Il’ Zaginam* (If I Die), Toba began singing along. The singers and musicians were astonished that she knew the words.

For many in our group, the desire to dance took precedence over food and drink. So when the band began playing a hypnotic Macedonian *lesnoto oro*, the bread, wine, and *snezhanka* were quickly abandoned.

After a few spirited forest dances, Jim approached the German group and asked their vivacious, red-haired Bulgarian guide Sonia if her group would like to join us in our mountain dance. At first, he was greeted with cheerful *neins*, but within minutes, a handful of Germans, after grasping the graciousness of his gesture, left their pork cutlets and boiled potatoes to join in our forest dancing. Soon everyone was up dancing, unable to resist the call of fun. Knowing the dance steps was helpful, but not required--all moved in the same direction, hands joined, caught up in the spirit of the moment--a Pirin Mountain moment.

We danced through the dusk and twilight, until only the moon illuminated our mountain clearing. The hypnotic mood continued on the bus ride back to Bansko, as Polly and Toba softly sang while the bus rhythmically swayed. Many on the bus exchanged the same sentiment. “We could go home tomorrow and feel we’ve gotten our money’s worth.” It was only Day Four! We were all in sync with the rhythm of the trip.

Back at the hotel, those with energy continued dancing in the lower level dining room. Repeating the previous night’s dance class, Ventzy played gaida and Iglika taught new steps. Close to midnight, Ventzy played “Happy Birthday” on his gaida for Arthur.

If there’s one thing Jim Gold understands, it’s rhythm—both the rhythm of the dance and the rhythm of his overseas tours, which he’s been leading for twenty-five years. When he teaches folk dance, he warms up the group with Hungarian *csárdás*, a Bulgarian *pravo horo*, or a Greek *syрто*, then shifts to faster dances such as Romanian *horas* or a Serbian *kolo*, which stimulate release of more pleasure-producing endorphins. At the end of the class, he cools the dancers down with the slow Greek “Miserlou,” “Lesnoto” from Macedonia, or “Erev Ba” from Israel.

He runs his two-week tours in a similar fashion, like an extended folk choreography, mindful of human rhythms and the importance of contrast. During our first few days in Sofia, we adjusted to jet lag and became acquainted with one another, dined, and took historic walking tours.

The next day we left the city for a series of exhilarating events: Kremena’s singing workshop, the Dobarski *Babi*, and the Pirin Mountain picnic. All were transforming experiences that

became part of our collective memories and glued us together as a group. We'd been dancing together for nearly a week. Although all looked forward to more of the same, it was time to slow down, in preparation for the second week's adventures.

Both nature and our itinerary complied, for we'd spend most of the next day on the bus headed for the famous Pamporovo Ski Resort, high in the romantic Rhodope Mountains—125 miles from Bansko. Getting there would be a full day's drive on two-lane roads; the first fifty kilometers through the Momina Klissoura Gorge along the Mesta River. On the map, that route resembled small intestines. It looked like smoother sailing between the town of Gotse Delchev and Pamporovo.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” Jim announced over the bus loudspeaker, “I’ve just gotten off the phone with Dafo Trendafilov, the master of the Bulgarian *kaba gaida*. He lives in the small village of Gela, between here and Pamporovo. It’s not on our itinerary but he’s willing to meet with us and show us his gaida workshop.”

“There’s also a small folk fair near Gela,” he continued. “We’ll stop there if we have extra time.”

Deviating from the planned itinerary and being open to serendipities and surprises was what Paul Kerlee had earlier told me he most enjoyed about Jim’s tours. “This type of spontaneity rarely happens on traditional tours abroad. It’s why I always enjoy traveling with Jim,” he said.

Jim told me privately he’d been trying to arrange that meeting with the aging Dafo for the past three years. Each time, the elderly gaida master had been out of town—touring or teaching at summer folk festivals—or unavailable for medical reasons. Jim had persisted, and to both his and Ventzy’s delight, the master was around that weekend and willing to meet with us.

The gaida, the companion of every solitary sheepherder, is the most popular folk instrument in Bulgaria, used at weddings and other celebrations. Although the sound produced depends on the type of gaida and the region it was produced, all gaidas share a common form: white kidskin bag, blowpipe, drone and chanter. Jim’s gaida was a *djura gaida*, made from the skin of a three-month old kid. In the south Bulgarian Rhodope Mountain region, where we were headed, they make the larger, deeper-pitched *kaba gaidi*, from older goats. Dafo, Jim told us, was the master of the *kaba gaida*.

It began to rain steadily, and our driver Pero stopped at a modern, full-service gas station to refuel, give us an opportunity to purchase snacks, stretch our legs, use the bathrooms and... dance in the rain! Toba and Polly began singing; seconds later Julia, Emily, Ilana, and Janet linked arms and

began dancing in the gas station. The Bulgarian truckers looked amused as they pumped gas into their rigs. “Dancing is in our blood,” Julia beamed. “We can’t help ourselves!”

After all had used the facilities, we continued on towards Gela, passing the towns of Gotse Delchev, Dospot, and Devin. Devin is one of Bulgaria’s many spa towns (balneologic resorts), and the source of Bulgaria’s leading brand of bottled mineral water. (We had been forced to toss our bottles of Poland Spring water at JFK airport. We replaced them with bottles of delicious Devin water in Bulgaria.)

The two-lane road we had been traveling on most of the morning became narrower and less well-maintained as we got closer to Gela. Pero skillfully handled the hairpin turns, the deep ruts, the rock debris that littered the road, as well as the low-hanging clouds that obscured his vision. Some of the bridges we crossed seemed no wider than a double mattress. At one point, the road became a mix of dirt and gravel. “Where the heck are we?” some wondered, as the road, at one point, went through the center of a deserted saw mill! Clearly, not all roads led to Gela. We were really off the beaten track in the Rhodopes!

One of our group, who apparently had been drinking too much Devin water since our last stop, yelled out, “Are we almost there? We need a bathroom break.” Jim promised that Gela was just around the river bend. Moments later, after driving through the clouds, we beheld the enchanted village of Gela on the horizon. Our huge, shiny white bus seemed so out of place in that remote place where horse-drawn carts and grazing cows outnumbered cars. Pero struggled to find a suitable place to park without blocking the narrow road.

Jim and Stefan jumped out to ask the locals where we could find both the folk fair and the home of the gaida master Dafo. A local Gelan told them that the fair was five kilometers away, accessible only by foot, motorcycle, or small cars. Our bus was too big. The local then extended his arm toward the mountain behind us, saying Dafo’s home was “somewhere up there,” a twenty-minute walk at most. The folk fair was out, but the trek to Dafo’s workshop was on!

While a few chose to stay behind, hoping to find a café with modern “facilities,” the rest followed Jim as he led the way through the clouds on what someone reverently called the “stairway to Heaven.” After much questioning of local passersby, we eventually found the home of Dafo, and the old man welcomed us onto his terrace, one shaded by grape trellises.

The ninety-year old Dafo, who reminded us of Zorba the Greek, told us (through Stefan) that he started playing gaida early in his life, while he tended sheep on the mountainside. In addition to

playing the gaida (every day of his life!), he made gaidas in his workshop. He estimated he'd made over two hundred of them! He also taught gaida at the nearby Shiroka Lûka Music High School, at music academies, and at folk music workshops throughout Bulgaria. The day before, he had been a judge at the fifth annual gaida contest at the local folk fair. (Although inaccessible to us, the Ilinden Folk Fair was still in progress, and we had heard the music in the distance as we ascended the path to his home.)

Jim asked Dafo to play for us; he initially declined, explaining that a painful arthritic condition of his hands had kept him from playing the past year. He deferred to Ventzy, handing his kaba gaida to his former student. Ventzy also declined, perhaps out of reverence to his master. Dafo then handed it to Jim, who accepted the challenge. He passed it back after a few minutes, but his performance, however brief, had resulted in a miracle cure for Dafo!

Dafo embraced his beloved instrument and, as we all watched in hushed silence, his arthritic fingers miraculously regained their flexibility and he began playing Rhodope village songs such as "Byala Sûm, Byala Yunache." Typically, at the sound of a gaida, our group would break out in spontaneous dance. That afternoon, on Dafo's cramped veranda, we remained motionless, in awe, as he played the music of his soul for the first time in over a year. Once again, our group shared a transcendent experience!

After his performance, he offered to show us his tiny workshop. Janet and I, both "cochlear-challenged" preferred to inhale as much fresh air as possible before boarding the bus. We hiked further up the mountain, hoping to catch a glimpse of the folk festival, the source of the music we could hear in the distance. A lone female voice, accompanied by a gaida, string *gadulka* and *kaval* flute, floated through the clouds. We stood in silence, gazing over the Appalachian-like hills and valleys below us, forming mental pictures of the woman with the haunting voice, "somewhere out there." Ventzy, perhaps also drawn to the music, approached us from behind and whispered, "That's the song they sent into space, on the Voyager II. We can listen to it later," he added, "on the bus. I have Dafo's CD, and Track 8 has this song."

It rained continually, slow and steady, after we left Gela. It was becoming commonplace on the trip for the rain to fall while we slept or dined indoors, but for the skies to clear whenever we had an outdoor activity planned. By the time we reached our 5-star Orlovetz Spa Hotel in Pamporovo,

which was shrouded in dense fog, we were in an altered state from the high altitude, the steady rainfall, the rhythmic swaying of the bus, and the low drone of Dafo's CD of Rhodope gaida music. While standing in line to check in, Jules, one of the non-dancers on the trip, remarked, "You don't have to be a folk dancer to appreciate the beauty of all we've seen on this trip."

A 1 p.m. checkout the following day would provide us plenty of time to reflect, read, and rejuvenate in the hotel spa, which had a pool, sauna, and steam room. I used my time to read my Lonely Planet Guide to Bulgaria for the first time. I was surprised to discover that Bulgaria, since ancient times, has been a top spa destination for those seeking both healing cures and the fountain of youth. In fact, Bulgaria has more than 800 mineral springs, more per square mile than any other country in the world! For centuries, those waters, used for both drinking and thermal bathing, and its mud and clays, found along the Black Sea coast, have been sought for their healing properties.

During Thracian times, I read, many settlements flourished in the vicinities of the hot springs. Romans also established "spa towns," in Bulgaria, including Augusta (present-day Hissarya), Dezudava (Sandanski), Pautalia (Kyustendil), and Serdica (Sofia). Many Roman emperors, including Maximilianus and Justinus, used Bulgaria's curative mineral waters for treating their disorders. Adding to its appeal as a spa destination, Bulgaria has a temperate climate and has, on average, twenty percent more sunny days per year than Central and North-West Europe. Who in the U.S. knows that?

This all fascinated both Kelly and me because our grandparents had moved from Texas to Colorado Springs just for the curative effects of the water.

After taking a dip in the circular pool, Kelly and I checked out the other spa facilities, including the steam room and the sauna. Optional services included a Bulgarian massage with cacao exfoliation, both for under forty bucks. Kelly had never had a massage; I'd been getting monthly ones in New York City's Chinatown for years, but was curious about *Bulgarian massage*. Hey, we said, we're on vacation! We signed up for the first slot the following morning.

That evening, after a sumptuous dinner in the hotel dining room, Ventzy once again played "Happy Birthday" on his gaida, this time to Paul Kerlee. Paul then entertained the group with a wild Maori dance he'd learned in New Zealand. Afterwards, we headed for our rooms for more rest and relaxation. Rain, thunder, and lightning continued throughout the night and into the morning.

After breakfast, Kelly and I headed down to the spa in our plush white hotel-issue robes. While we were waiting, a bald man who resembled a retired Olympic weight lifter, strode towards us. Kelly and I exchanged wide-eyed glances—we both hoped he would not be our masseur! He smiled at us, revealing a mouthful of gold teeth, greeted us with a cheerful “Dobre Den,” then walked on by. When he reappeared a few minutes later, carrying a toolbox, we both breathed a sigh of relief.

I had nothing to fear. My masseuse, Antonia, was a slightly built, twenty-three-year-old physical therapist who spoke English. She wore jeans and tee-shirt under her white lab coat. Normally, I prefer silence while getting a massage, but I wanted to learn more about Antonia and what life was like for a young person in Bulgaria. She welcomed the opportunity to practice her English as she gave me a gentle Swedish-style massage. I was on the verge of asking her to “press a little harder” when she told me she works seven straight days, from 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., then gets seven off. After that, I just relaxed. I was her first client of the day. She needed to conserve her strength to get through the next eleven!

Antonia told me she grew up in a small village nearby, and went to college in Sofia.

“Did you grow up near Gela?” I asked.

“No, but how do you know Gela?” she asked. “Few tourists visit Gela.”

“We did!” I told her we were folk dancers on a folk tour, and had visited the home of Dafo Trendifilo, the gaida master, in Gela. She shook her head in amazement.

“My older sister,” she said, “is a professional folk dancer. She spends most of her time touring the world.” I asked if Antonia had ever traveled outside Bulgaria.

“Never to Europe,” she said, “but I worked in the United States last summer, in New Jersey.”

“That’s where I live!” I replied. “Where in New Jersey?”

She had spent the summer, she said, in southern Jersey, working at the Wa Wa convenience store in Cape May, making coffee and sandwiches. At the end of her summer, she and other Bulgarian summer workers had taken a five-day trip around the U.S., visiting Niagara Falls, Michigan, and Chicago.

“Chicago’s my hometown,” I told her.

“I loved Chicago the most,” she said. “We ate in a Bulgarian restaurant there. I got homesick.” It was her first, and only, Bulgarian meal in the States, she told me.

“There were no Bulgarian restaurants in Chicago when I lived there,” I told her. “But that was twenty years ago.”

“There are many now!” she exclaimed. “Nearly 100,000 Bulgarians live in Chicago!”

*A hundred thousand!* Stefan had told us, on our first day, that many young Bulgarians were emigrating, both to the states and to Europe, for better paying jobs, leaving the elderly pensioners behind in deserted villages or in city tenements. (I later learned that Ramapo College of New Jersey actively recruits Bulgarian students due to their exceptionally high SAT scores. In 2007, Ramapo had over a hundred Bulgarian students enrolled. Bulgaria also has one of the highest literacy rates in Europe.)

“What do you do on your seven days off?” I asked Antonia.

“I visit my college friends in Sofia,” she said, “or we visit Plovdiv, my favorite city in Bulgaria.” Plovdiv, she told me, was a great blend of the old and the new. I told her Plovdiv was our next destination.

“You will love it!” she assured me. “Make sure you visit Old Plovdiv. There are many beautiful house museums there that were built in the National Revival Period.”

Although we had all come to Bulgaria for the music and the dance, we were equally interested in the art and history. After all, Bulgaria is one of the oldest European countries! Old Plovdiv, built on three hills, goes back to 5000 B.C., making it older than older than Rome, Athens, Carthage, or Constantinople!

Originally, the Thracians built a fortress and called it, at first, Eumolpia, and later Philipopolis. It remained a fortress until the Romans arrived in 46 A.D., built streets, towers, and aqueducts, and renamed it Trimontium (three hills). A second-century Roman amphitheater, one that seated 6000 people, was discovered in a freak landslide in 1972! The restored amphitheater is located in Old Plovdiv adjacent to the Plovdiv Academy of Music, and is often used for operas, theatrical events, and concerts. We’d visit it in the morning, Stefan told us, on our walking tour. We also learned that present-day “downtown Plovdiv” lies on the ruins of an enormous Roman Stadium that dates back to Emperor Septimus Severus (193 - 211 A.D.). Before it was sacked by the Goths and the Huns in the fifth century, it held 30 000 spectators!

We stayed at the 5-star Trimontium Princess, one of the “grand hotels” commissioned by Stalin in the early 1950s and completely renovated by its new Turkish owner in 2000 to include a

casino and an Olympic-sized pool. Typical of Soviet hotels, each floor had its own lobby. Our second-floor lobby had pink leather sofas trimmed in green wicker. *Where in the world had they found it?* we wondered.

The hotel, adjacent to the city garden and a short walk to Old Plovdiv, was perfectly situated for those of us who enjoyed exploring on our own. A marionette theater nearby, featuring folk-dancing puppets, drew a crowd. Jim suggested we dance on the stone veranda in front of the hotel after settling in. And of course we did, while Ventzy played the gaida, until it was time to depart for dinner at *Veselo Selo*.

*Veselo Selo* (Happy Village) is Plovdiv's most famous *mehana* and features a live folklore show. The place resembles a village market, with huge baskets of fresh vegetables and fruits, displays of fresh fish, dozens of racks of Bulgarian wine, and refrigerator cases filled with mouth-watering desserts lining the walls. Bustling waiters in native costume carried boards bursting with roasted peppers, tomatoes and eggplants, beans, cheeses, freshly baked bread, yogurt dips, bunches of grapes, broiled whole fish, and skewered meats. Food for the gods, and a feast for the eyes!

Halfway through the meal, the folklore show began. Instead of gold-toothed *babis* singing traditional folk songs, energetic young dancers entertained us for the next hour. In contrast to the traditional singing and dancing we'd seen in villages like Dobarsko and Kovashevtsi, this performance had a unique modern choreography that fused elements of Gypsy, Bulgarian, Greek, Romanian, and Turkish folklore. Plovdiv's unique location along ancient trade routes resulted in strong cultural and political influences from both Eastern and Western civilization, and was also reflected in its food and dance. After the show, still energized, the dancers raced around the room, grabbing diners to join them in traditional Bulgarian folk dances.

Our entire group happily vacated our seats and danced and pranced around the room for at least a half hour, until we realized the *mehana*'s roof was leaking. We had been oblivious to the thunder, lightning, and torrential downpour outside as we dined and danced.

"Time to go!" said Jim. Remarkably, the rain stopped briefly as we fled the restaurant, like a band of refugees, but as soon as we were all seated on the bus, the deluge resumed. We had eaten like gods at the restaurant; on our wild ride back to the hotel, the gods of thunder and lightning entertained us with a spectacular sound-and-light show. I had the best seat on the bus, the front one, and watched with amazement as Pero masterfully dodged the many cars afloat in the flooded ancient

streets of Plovdiv. We would later learn, on the CNN Headline News Europe, that the same storm flooded much of western Europe later in the week.

The next morning, under the clearest of blue skies, we explored Old Plovdiv. Like the museum town of Bankso, the exquisite houses in Old Plovdiv date back to the period of the Bulgarian National Revival. The highlights were the Ethnographic Museum, filled with folk costumes of past centuries and a coffee break overlooking the stage of the Roman amphitheater - a perfect place to folk dance, many of us thought.

In the afternoon, Jim found a bookstore downtown that had a map of Bulgaria, in English, on the rack.

“These are impossible to find!” he said, and asked the clerk if she had any more.

“How many?” she asked.

“I need forty,” he said.

She made a quick phone call and said she could get that many within a half hour. That evening, Jim passed out the treasured maps to each tourist.

In the evening, we dined under the stars at the famous Alafrangi Restaurant, a French one where Pope John Paul II had lunched during his 2001 visit. We had to walk up several winding cobblestone lanes, too narrow for our bus or even small automobiles, before reaching the entrance. Like much of Bulgaria, the cobblestone streets were filled with friendly cats and kittens, who led us, tails up, to the restaurant and accompanied us as we dined, *al fresco*, on a stone patio surrounded by high stone walls, under grape trellises and fig trees. From our chairs, we could literally reach up and pluck the low-hanging grapes and figs above. Thank goodness, we murmured, that we hadn't eaten here, outdoors, the night before, during the rainstorm.

We ate our salad, which was followed by a piquant chicken stew, *kapama*, served in an earthenware cup so small we thought it was an appetizer. As soon as we finished it, we were served a scoop of ice cream.

“What about the main course?” we all wondered out loud.

“French restaurants are the same everywhere!” one tourist lamented. We had become spoiled by the plentiful servings to date on the trip.

The highlight of the evening was dancing in the courtyard of the Alafrangi as Ventzy provided the music. We wove among the fig trees that grew out of the patio, bobbing our heads to

avoid the low-hanging branches and the bunches of ripe black grapes that hung over us. Several German diners joined us. The sixth dance was our last with Ventzy and Iglïka--they were headed for a folk workshop in Germany the next morning. And we would head due northeast toward Veliko Turnovo, the medieval capital of Bulgaria.

It was appropriate, on a Jim Gold tour, to drive through the Kazanlûk Valley, home to Bulgaria's ancient and modern gold treasures. The "ancient" were the Thracian gold artifacts buried inside a thousand earthen mounds lining the fifty-mile road. These mounds were the unexcavated royal tombs of the Thracian kings dating back to the fifth century B.C. The Thracian gold treasures we'd seen in Sofia had come from tombs such as these.

"Tomb raiders are an ever-present threat," Stefan said. Apparently, the illegal exporting of Bulgaria's antiquities from these and the 25,000 other Thracian tombs scattered throughout Bulgaria, is a thriving underground business. We made a brief stop at one of the legally excavated tombs in Kazanlûk, a UNESCO Heritage Site.

The modern "gold treasure" is rose oil, often referred to as "Bulgarian gold" due to its high market price. 14,000 acres of roses, the source of seventy percent of the world's extract of roses, flank the highway. Each May, when the roses are at their peak, thousands of young girls and women pick the petals, a hundred from each rose, before the sun rises and evaporates the precious oil.

We were two months late for the rose season, but bright yellow sunflowers and grapes were at their peak, and we passed fields full of them as we headed for the Shipka Pass. Earlier in the week, we passed through villages where tobacco was hanging out to dry. Sunflower oil, wine, and tobacco are among Bulgaria's leading agricultural products.

Before crossing the dramatic Shipka Pass, we stopped at the brightly painted (pink-and-green) Shipka Memorial Church, resplendent with five newly gold-plated, onion-shaped domes, a fifty-meter-high spire, and murals portraying figures from Russian history. Like the Alexander Nevski Memorial Church in Sofia, this one was built to honor those who fought in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, when seven thousand Russian soldiers and Bulgarian volunteers defended the Shipka Pass against 27,000 Turks. The remains of many are buried in the church's crypts. Its seventeen church bells were cast from bullets found on the mountain; the largest bell weighs twelve tons!

I sat in the front row for the spectacular drive across the Shipka Pass. The road, one hairpin turn after another, took us high above the tree line. Always in view was the towering (thirty-two-meter-high) stone Freedom Monument, erected in the 1890s, at the summit of Mount Stoletov. All total, two-hundred-thousand Russian soldiers and 29,000 Bulgarians gave their lives fighting for Bulgaria's freedom from the Turks. One of the casualties was Bulgarian poet and freedom fighter Hristo Botev, who declared, "He who perishes fighting for freedom does not die."

The five hundred years of Turkish domination had begun with the defeat of Veliko Turnovo, the capital of medieval Bulgaria, back in 1395. It was the first city we visited with paved streets. Sofia's and Plovdiv's streets had been cobbled, as were the streets of all the villages we'd visited. As a former nurse, I was concerned that someone in our group might twist an ankle from walking on wobbly cobblestones or from dancing on steep slopes, or get poked in the eye while dodging low-hanging branches and fruit as they danced on garden patios. But this was a hardy and optimistic group! Nothing kept them from dancing.

Veliko Turnovo is a hardy city, too; its red-roofed homes were perched precariously on the steep granite cliffs on the west bank of the meandering Yantra River. They resembled a house of cards that would tumble down on one another if someone sneezed. It's also an optimistic town, because even after centuries of sacking and destruction by the Byzantines and Turks, and a devastating earthquake that leveled the town in 1913, the townspeople have always rebuilt to keep "the spirit of Veliko Turnovo" alive.

Our 4-star Yantra hotel room had a dramatic view of the Tsarevets Royal Hill, on the Yantra's east bank. The hill was a natural, inaccessible fortress where twenty-two Bulgarian kings once ruled and created the Bulgarian empire. This archaeological reserve once contained a massive fifth-century fortress, a Royal Palace, eighteen churches, several monasteries, four hundred houses, shops, gates, and towers. Many thick walls had been restored, but it was still difficult to imagine how it had looked in its past glory, even after watching the dramatic forty-minute Sound and Light Show later that night.

Restoration is always ongoing in Bulgaria; the thirteenth-century Church of the Blessed Savior, and Baudouin's Tower, were among the two ruins extensively restored on the hill.

Just outside the hotel lobby stood the entrance to the old city, where we explored the crafts shops and art studios along *Ulitsa Blagoev* during our free time. Glazed ceramic bowls, hand-painted

jewelry, icons, colorful weavings, copper utensils, and antique belt buckles and aprons lay on display outside the shops. I purchased a shiny copper cup from a smith whose shop was filled with bright kettles handcrafted on the premises. I also asked for the cards of several entrepreneurial women who made their living on hand-embroidered tablecloths and blouses or hand-crafted jewelry or pottery. Many, surprisingly, had their own websites!

Our hotel's gift shop displayed a newly-released book entitled The Magic of Bulgaria, packed with vibrant photos of Bulgaria's colorful folklore. We recognized the photos of several of the Dobarski *babi* we had met just days earlier.

On the bus ride to Veliko Turnovo, one of our group asked Stefan about medical care in Bulgaria. He was frank. Socialized medicine wasn't all it was cracked up to be, he said, especially in Bulgaria. Medical care of any kind was inaccessible to many due to a severe shortage of health care professionals.

In Veliko Turnovo, I had a chance to see for myself what it was like. Jim's cousin, Ellen, had a persistent cough that was getting worse, to the point where she hadn't slept in two nights. It sounded like bronchitis--or pneumonia. We asked the clerk at the front desk if there was a house doctor. There wasn't. Nor was there a clinic or a private doctor's office in the city!

"If you need to see a doctor," the front desk clerk said, "you must go to the hospital emergency room."

"Even for a cough?" we asked.

"For any medical problem," she replied.

Neither of us wanted to go to the emergency room, which we assumed would be an all-day affair. But Ellen needed more potent medicine than she could purchase over the counter. If we went, I knew we'd need to know more Bulgarian than *evenitseh* and *blagodarya* to navigate our way, so I asked the desk clerk to write, in Bulgarian, "We are Americans on tour. I've had a bad cough for one week and my medicine doesn't help. No sleep for two nights. No allergies. No other medical conditions."

We then hopped into one of the hundreds of yellow taxis that cruised the town's streets. Our driver darted wildly down back streets, going through stop signs, as if Ellen was in labor and ready to deliver. He dropped us off at the main entrance of the most depressing building I had yet seen in Bulgaria--a gray, multi-story cinderblock clearly built in Soviet times. By contrast, the city hospital I had trained in, Cook County Hospital in Chicago, was an opulent palace.

The place was deserted! There were no ambulances lined up outside or benches filled with patient relatives. We wandered its dingy halls until we found a woman in a green scrub suit and showed her our note. She smiled and led us down the hall to the emergency room, a small, hot, cramped space with three examination tables. A man and a woman, both wearing white scrub suits, were watching the CNN Europe news on the television.

We handed our note to the portly, bald man, who introduced himself as Dr. Zakov. After reading our note, he sent the woman to find a translator. Within minutes, she brought back two English-speaking medical students: Delyan and Atanas. Both were twenty years old, from Varna, and studying medicine in Sofia. It was their first day there, they told us.

The doctor examined Ellen quickly, by feeling her skin and listening to her breath sounds. No vital signs—temperature, pulse, or blood pressure--were taken. He sent us upstairs for a chest X-ray, accompanied by Delyan and Atanas. Even though Ellen was short of breath and struggling to climb the stairs, the elevator, we were told, could only be used for patients who were on stretchers or in a wheelchair. While Ellen was getting the X-ray, I asked the medical students about school and their families. Delyan told me his parents were both pulmonologists who specialized in tuberculosis, a disease still prevalent in Roma villages, he said. Atanas' father was an orthopedic surgeon.

The x-ray took less than fifteen minutes and we returned to the ER carrying the image. The doctor told Ellen her lungs were clear and he wrote out a prescription for a cough suppressant with codeine.

“What types of emergencies do you usually treat here?” I asked.

“Mostly car accidents,” he said, through Delyan. “Bulgarian drivers here are new to driving. They drive too fast around mountain curves, they don't read the signs or stop for pedestrians. So we get many injured drivers and those they hit.” I recalled the several near misses Kelly and I had had in Sofia, and the wild taxi ride we had just taken.

“What do we owe you?” we asked.

“Nothing,” he replied. “In Bulgaria, emergency care is free.”

“Will you take a tip?” Ellen asked.

“Of course! *Blagodarya!*” For a tip of \$20, Ellen had received an examination, an X-ray and a prescription.

Delyan told the waiting taxi driver to take us to a particular pharmacy and to wait until the prescription was filled. The prescription cost less than a dollar to fill. The entire event had taken less than an hour.

Ellen had just seen Michael Moore's latest movie Sicko. "I'm writing him to tell him about this wonderful experience," Ellen said.

I suspected, however, there was far more than met our eyes on our brief visit. It was a bare bones ER, and both medical students told us that medical professionals, even after years of training, make a fraction of their Western counterparts, which had contributed to the shortage of health care professionals in Bulgaria.

It's a long way to Koprivshitsa, and we'd once again be crossing the Balkan Mountains, this time over the 1450 meter high Troyan Pass. I was one of the last to board the bus that morning, so the coveted seats up front, those Jim had reserved for the "cochlear-challenged," had already been taken. I found a seat in the back next to Hudi, the musician from Oakland, California. So far, I'd seen Hudi playing an accordion, a *gaida*, and a *kaval*. He wasn't a folk dancer, he said, but like Kelly, Ed, and the other "non-dancers," he'd been dancing since the Bor Restaurant.

On the bus, Hudi was always plugged into his iPod, and I asked him what kind of music he listened to.

"On this trip, Balkan fusion, Bulgarian wedding music, klezmer, gypsy music, and Balkan brass bands." He told me he had 400 tunes of that nature stored on his iPod. "There are a lot of young musicians into Balkan rhythms," he explained. "They're different, and challenging."

I told him that, earlier that year, I'd been to a concert by a gypsy punk band called Luminescent Orchestrii. Their home base was the Bulgarian Club on Manhattan's Lower East side. With two fiddles, a resophonic guitar, a bullhorn harmonica, and a bass, they bill themselves as "a frenetic blend of Romanian gypsy melodies, klezmer, haunting Balkan harmonies, salty tangos, and Appalachian fiddle." I had purchased their CD and lent it to Jim, who had choreographed two dances from it. Hudi hadn't heard of them but said he had recordings of similar groups.

"Would you like to listen?" He offered me one of his iPod earphones.

For the next three hours, we listened to selections from Balkan-influenced groups with names such as Gogol Bordello, Charming Hostess, Slavic Soul Party, the Kocani Orkestar, Brass Menažeri,

and Zlatne Uste. Amazingly, Hudi knew the names of all the performers. “That’s Petko Radev on the clarinet,” he’d say, or “Ibro Lolov is playing the accordion.”

He also knew all the rhythms. “This selection is a *rúchenitza* with a 7/8 rhythm,” he’d explain. “This next one is a *čoček* 4/4 rhythm, popular with gypsy bands.” Or, “This is a *lesnoto* with a 7/8 rhythm.” What a music lesson!

Remarkably, even though the ride was a wild one, and the road through the Troyan Pass zigged and zagged, as long as Hudi played the exciting, pulsating, Gypsy music, the *čoček*, I didn’t get nauseated. When he played purely vocal music, by the *Trio Bulgarka* or *Les Mystere des Voix Bulgares*, I broke into a cold sweat and tapped him on the hand. He’d skip ahead to another gypsy tune, which brought instant relief! I’d kept my motion sickness at bay, Hudi told me later, by focusing primarily on the music of accordionist Ibro Lolov and his Gypsy Orchestra.

“*Čoček* checks upchuck!” he laughed.

Who’d have known?

According to the Greek philosopher Democritus, life without festivals is like a long journey without rest stops. Bulgaria is known for its many folk festivals, and many in the group were looking forward to the “grand finale” of the trip, the one in Koprivshitsa. Emily, Polly, and Julia had purchased aprons, socks, blouses, and belt buckles at antique stores in Plovdiv and Veliko Turnovo; all looked forward to dancing in costume at the festival.

Bulgarians have festivals for every occasion, but Koprivshitsa was the mother of all Bulgarian festivals—so big that it’s only held every five years over a three-day weekend in August, in the meadows on the outskirts of town.

Jim assured us that, even though it was an “off year,” there would still be plenty of local performers; instead of the meadows, they’d perform in the town square. And sure enough, as we stepped off our bus at the first hotel, we could hear the sound of music down the street.

Koprivshitsa, like most villages we’d visited in Bulgaria, was high in the mountains, the Sredna Gora, bisected by a fast-moving mountain river, the Topolnitsa, and was an architectural reserve of exquisite, restored homes from the Bulgarian National Revival period. This was the eighth, and final, museum town we’d visit on our trip. The others had been Bansko, Veliko Turnovo, Etura, Tryavna, Old Plovdiv, Arbanassi, and Shiroka Luka.

Most of our group stayed at a modern four-story hotel, one that resembled a Swiss chalet, two blocks from the town square. A smaller group went to the Dahlia Family Hotel, a half-timber structure that dated back to 1758, located on the other side of the Topolnitza. The owner's son, Niko, led us through the thick wooden gates to a lovely courtyard filled with colorful dahlias. Baskets of flowers hung from the second-floor balcony.

All of our hotels had been first rate, but the Dahlia reminded us of the intimate, "up close to the locals," experiences we'd shared the past two weeks. More like a bed and breakfast, each room was unique, and we ran through the place like children, oohing and aahing at all the old-world charm, bouncing on the beds, and expressing surprise at the modern facilities. Niko showed us the room where breakfast would be served in the morning. As we inhaled the cool mountain air, we all agreed the Dahlia was "almost Heaven."

The room that Kelly and I shared had a book shelf, and we laughed when we saw that Jim's A New Leaf, Volume 2 was on the shelf, alongside Confessions of a Bad Mother. All the other books were Bulgarian. After settling in, we headed to the town square, following the sound of the music.

The next morning, Stefan led us on a walking tour of Koprivshitsa, and we learned that the village was home to many prominent revolutionaries who took part in the April Uprising of 1876. We took a group photo on the Kolachev Bridge, where, on April 7, revolutionary leader Todor Kableskov fired the first shots of the revolution against the Turks. Shortly after, he was killed, at the age of twenty-five.

On the walk, Jim kept remarking on how peaceful the town was in contrast to when the big festival was in progress, when the streets were wall-to-wall people.

I returned to the Dahlia after the walk; Niko had just finished cleaning the rooms.

"Where is the big festival normally held?" I asked him. "Koprivshitsa seems too small to hold thousands of people!"

"Just outside of town," he said, pointing toward one of the mountains, "in the Voivodenets meadow. Would you like me to take you there?"

"How far a drive is it?" I asked.

"We can't drive cars there," he said. "You can only walk on the streets of Koprivshitsa, or drive a horse cart. But it won't take more than a half hour to get there."

Since I really wanted to see the festival site, I took him up on his offer.

Many of the festival vendors had set up shops along the main street in town. They sold candy, toys, souvenirs, grilled kebabs, jewelry, ice cream, and fresh fruits. A dozen members of a gypsy family sold brightly colored rugs and weavings; all were draped over two old cars, one painted bright orange, the other bright green.

“They sleep in their cars,” Niko told me.

After purchasing ice cream cones for both of us, he led me back through the historic village, over the stone bridge where the first shots had been fired, past the brightly painted homes of the freedom fighters and poets and the open courtyards filled with flower gardens. Horse drawn wagons and mule carts passed us, piled high with newly cut hay.

I asked questions as we walked on the narrow cobblestone lanes, about the village and about his family. His English was perfect. He also spoke a little French, and Greek, he said, that he’d learned in high school.

He told me he was twenty-one, just a year older than my daughter. He said his family had bought the hotel three years before; then, it was just an old home in need of much repair. It had taken them two years to renovate the existing structure, and build two additional rooms, a kitchen, and a serving area. They did everything themselves. His sister, he told me, spent her summers at the seashore, working at the McDonald’s in Varna; in the winter, she worked at a ski resort. Getting a job at McDonald’s wasn’t easy, he told me. The family was proud of her.

On the outskirts of town, we passed one of two town cemeteries, one whose tombstones, all in Cyrillic, were decorated with freshly cut flowers. We heard loud mewing coming from the potato patch on our right. Niko called to the animal in Bulgarian, and a black kitten scampered out of the patch, purring and rubbing up against our legs. Niko shared the last of his ice cream cone with it.

Higher and higher we climbed above the village; the kitten took turns leading and following, its little tail erect the entire time.

The cobblestone street had become a dirt path; towering evergreens, interspersed with meadows, surrounded us. We looked down at the red roofs of the village, far below us. I had been to Europe several times—few places were as peaceful or picturesque as this. Finally, after much huffing and puffing, we could see the first performing platform, a concrete square, below us in the meadow.

“Would you like me to take your picture on the platform?” he offered.

I handed him my camera and ran down the path. Behind me was a vast panorama of the Sredna Gora mountain range. Further below, out of view, were the seven other performance platforms. One was enough to get the picture.

“Imagine this path lined with food and beer vendors,” he said, waving his hands in the air. “And thousands of performers from all over Bulgaria, wearing their local costumes, practicing with their friends. Visitors set up their tents all over the meadow. The music goes on all night! The singers, the dancers, the musicians--it never stops.”

I tried to imagine both the people and the music, and the mood.

Niko, with his knowledge of languages, his easygoing personality, and his entrepreneurial spirit, would have made an excellent Bulgarian tour guide. After he took my photo, I suggested he look into it, and he told me, not surprisingly, that he was already taking classes. He had spent over an hour with me. I gave him the equivalent of \$20 American in Bulgarian *leva* for his time.

After our walk, I headed back to the cobblestoned town square. The festival would be a riot of color, and I wanted to capture as much of it as I could with my digital camera. Belatedly I realized that only video cameras could do justice to it—the colorful costumes and wonderful facial expressions were all I could capture with mine. The music, singing, and the dance steps would remain only in my memory.

The setting was a simple and intimate one—a plywood stage, an open area in front on the cobblestones, for dancing, and a dozen rows of backless benches set up in a semi-circle.

I sat on a bench in the back row and watched for a while—mostly women’s singing groups, all dressed in colorful costumes unique to their villages. Vibrant red, black, orange, and bright blue dominated. Interspersed with the female singing were groups of men in fur hats, hunter green wool vests, bright red sashes, and brown knickers, the traditional alpine costume, playing instrumental music. Gaida, tupan, kaval, gadulka, and accordion. Several children also performed; they reminded me of Deni and Galia, back in Kovachevtsi.

While those around me had their eyes glued to the performers onstage, I was taking in the audience, mostly elderly Bulgarian men and women in black or dark green dresses, black stockings, and heavy black shoes. Many had stooped backs, had canes at their sides, and held umbrellas to shade them from the intense alpine sun. Their faces were deeply-lined, their hands gnarled from arthritis. Those in their eighties had lived through wars, famines, Communist dictatorships, and

economic hard times. I recalled what Christo, the retired engineer in Sofia, had told me at the pensioners' rally, how most retired Bulgarians survived on \$100 a month. For elderly Bulgarians, things were still tough.

By coming to Koprivshtitsa, these Bulgarian seniors were taking one more rest stop on life's long journey. There, while listening to music and engaging in the occasional dance, they gossiped with their old friends, shared the good news about a great-grandchild who'd graduated from college, or the neighbor who moved to England, or better yet, America! and got a good-paying job. I'm sure many wondered, as they sat there, if this festival might be their last.

They also smiled at me when they caught me looking at them. Instead of pretending I wasn't looking, I always smiled back. One old woman, easily a centenarian and clad entirely in black, kept looking my way. Her eyes were wide and milky blue; her toothless mouth, with the exception of one fang hanging out, was etched in a permanent smile. I so wanted to take her photo, but didn't, out of respect. Even after she got up to leave, she kept looking back at me. The smile never left her face. Perhaps, with my own blue eyes, I resembled a much-loved great-granddaughter. Or perhaps she had dementia.

I moved to the back of the stage to observe the performing groups getting ready, and enjoyed that experience even more. Groups of *babi* from various villages, all wearing identical costumes, sat together on the curbs, or stood in groups, making sure every last detail was taken care of before taking the stage—the fresh flower behind the ear, the red head scarf, or the gold necklace. I saw two, perhaps in their nineties, apply fresh lipstick and rouge to each other's faces. I saw no hand-held mirrors; each woman was a human mirror for the other. A smile and a sideways nod meant the other was beautiful, and ready to take the stage.

Some asked if I'd take their photos, and they'd get up from the curb, line up, and smile widely for my camera. A few asked in Bulgarian and sign language where I was from. When I told them "America" or "USA", they'd grab my hand and begin conversing rapidly in Bulgarian. I made it clear I didn't speak Bulgarian, but they continued on, perhaps telling me that George Bush had visited that summer, or that their son or daughter now lived in America—in Chicago, or maybe even New Jersey. They were clearly pleased I was an American.

One group of women, dressed in vibrant red and black costumes, beckoned me to pose with them, and I turned the camera over to a stranger, who obliged. The only variation in their costumes was the belt buckle. Afterwards, the tallest and youngest of the group, one who spoke a little

English, wrote her address down, in Cyrillic, and asked me to send her the photo so she could share it with the group. Stefan later wrote it in English for me.

After I took the photo of a group of seven male musicians, one offered me his flask, and I had my first gulp of Bulgarian brandy, *rakia*.

I enjoyed this “behind the stage” experience, where we communicated primarily with our eyes and our shared smiles. I must have uttered a thousand *blagodaryas*.

After an hour or so, I strolled down the street lined with vendors. The gypsy family approached me with their colorful weavings. The ten-year-old daughter, one with dark, shining eyes, spoke excellent English. She and her father were such good salespeople that I parted with my last Bulgarian *leva*. They also asked me to take their photo. They stopped selling for thirty seconds to pose, then the father insisted, with hand gestures, that I get in the picture, and took another group photo. The daughter wrote the address of their village on a newspaper, and asked me to send them the photo.

Later, I joined Emily, Julia, King, and Odette at the outdoor café that faced the stage. Once again, we ordered an assortment of Bulgarian dishes, including grilled trout, and shared them. I also drank my final Kamenitza beer.

On our last morning in Bulgaria, a cool, crisp one, I awoke at five to the crowing roosters and barking dogs of Koprivshitsa. I sat on the antique rocking chair on the balcony, bundled in my comforter, reading Jim’s book. Remarkably, I’d opened the book to his Bulgarian trip in 1995.

I spent the next hour reading Jim’s take on “the state of the spirit” that Bulgarian monks had created in the ninth century.

*“Higher education, higher learning, evangelizing the Slavs in south and southeastern Europe, creating a mood, an atmosphere of learning and admiration of the spirit which would survive, whether a Bulgarian state would survive or not.”*

*The state of the spirit.*

I read on.

*“The medieval Bulgarian state was a reflection of the medieval Bulgarian spirit. States and governments are miniscule compared to spirit. But to the human voyager passing through in a rowboat, canoe, ship, freighter or even ocean liner, these passing states may loom large indeed, especially if there seems to be no higher forms of nourishment in the ocean; these objects in the*

*water may seem to be the ocean itself. This is the height of blindness exemplified by the communist system, whose destructive day in Bulgaria is slowly dying. The Bulgarian Floating Potato Party is still active but it is a shadow of its former self. New potatoes, home fries, French fries, and others are rising. Hopefully they will embrace the potato of the spirit as well.*

I read on the balcony until the sun rose and the smell of freshly brewed coffee wafted my way. The cocks had stopped crowing and the dogs ceased their yelping. I relished my last breakfast in Bulgaria, one cooked and served by Niko and his mother: warm *banitsa*, fresh tomatoes and yellow peppers, olives, feta cheese, and juicy cubes of ripe red watermelon. One of our group requested toast and a hard boiled egg instead of *banitsa*.

“No problem!” said Niko. He and his mother aimed to please their guests—they were the “new potatoes” of Bulgaria.

A television in the breakfast room showed videos of folk dancers. Bruce and Hudi said that was the Bulgarian culture channel, “Bulgaria’s MTV.” Although we had televisions in our rooms throughout the trip, Kelly and I had never turned ours on.

“Do you have guests here all summer?” I asked Niko, “or just during the festival?”

“French tourists stay at the Dahlia every Tuesday,” he told me. “Israeli tourists on Thursday; a Greek tour comes through every Friday. Your group is the only American one so far this summer!”

After breakfast, he helped us bring our heavy suitcases, packed to the gills with Bulgarian pottery, rose oil, copper cups, embroidered blouses, and woven purses (from the gypsies), down the steep steps. He handed each lady a freshly picked dahlia from his garden.

“Please return next year,” he said, “and tell your American friends to come and see our beautiful Bulgaria.” He handed me his card which read:

*The Dahlia Family Hotel is situated in the heart of the national revival town of Koprivshtitsa. Four double and three triple rooms are at your disposal. Authentic style, warmth and cosiness. Each of them has a bath, a mini bar and a TV set. Breakfast and guide - at your request.*

The Dahlia even had its own website, [www.dahlia.hit.bg](http://www.dahlia.hit.bg)! “I will tell them!” I promised.

Carol Karels

Our folk tour to Bulgaria, where the hills and valleys were alive with the sound of music, was unforgettable.