

Bulgaria

By Jody Unterrheiner

‘Snow plough, snow plough!’ If you are a beginner on the snow fields, you will no doubt hear this expression often. You are guaranteed to hear this command drilled into you by your ski instructor if you venture to the Bulgarian snow fields known as Borovets, Pomporovo and Bansko.

Bulgaria is a hidden treasure for snow lovers, which has recently been discovered by European tourists looking for a value-for-money ski holiday.

Ninety per cent of tourists are British, and once you have experienced the Bulgarian hospitality, you will have many reasons to return.

Borovets is 73km away from the capital Sofia on the northern slopes of Rila Mountain. In good snow conditions, there’s 40km of ski runs – seven blue, 15 red and one black.

The single highlight of any trip to Bulgaria would be the local hospitality.

Beginners and intermediate skiers should expect week-long tuition for at least four hours a day. This means when you fall over on the slopes your instructor is there to pick you up, when you slip on the drag lift he is there to guide you back to the bottom and when you think you can’t stop, he will give you fantastic advice: ‘snow plough’. Like teaching a baby to walk, he will be with you the whole time.

Beginners can be quite content with a small amount of snow fall, combined with the snow produced from the ‘canons’. Experiences ones, however, need to wait for a moderate amount of snowfall. They can spend their quiet days in the tourist-dominated resort where their Bulgarian Leva (roughly one pound to three leva) will quickly dwindle away in local bars – ladies, make sure your men stay clear of the plethora of playboy bars dotted across the resort.

I travelled with five other beginners with Crystal Holidays and stayed at the three-star Hotel Ela – clean and comfortable. Staff members went out of their way to please us, they even served dinner when we got in one night at midnight.

Half-board was a good basis. Breakfast was safe, with plenty of toast and cereal available, along with salad, cold meat and cheeses.

For dinner, try to be adventurous and dabble in the local culinary delights. Stay clear of the local water – three days with a stomach bug and the worst on Christmas Day was one quick lesson learnt.

The locals will try their hardest to entice you into dining at their restaurants. The staff are friendly, however great food is hard to find in the resort.

Ski instructors will take you to the most expensive places on the resort for lunch – which when converted, equates to London prices. These tourist-orientated restaurants are owned by the same company the instructors work for – a free meal for them is pretty big motivation to bring along their class of eight for lunch.

Don’t be afraid to turn down the offer and walk 50m down the hill where a hot dog stand will sell almost the same food for a third of the price.

We took a break from skiing one afternoon and went for a guided tour into the capital, where little English is spoken. Your guide can show you where to shop, as well as give you a small history lesson on some of the beautiful attractions.

Another worthwhile afternoon outing is to the nearby village of Samokov. Catch a minibus for one leva – buses leave every half an hour and the journey takes 15 minutes. A trip to Samokov is a closer look at the real Bulgarian culture.

A market stretches through the village centre selling fruit, vegetables and clothes at a bargain price.

We were overwhelmed by the hospitality when we visited the local post office to buy a phone card to call home on Christmas Day. It had closed two hours beforehand, but the staff, even though they spoke no English, wanted to help us.

After 20 minutes of hand signals and pointing at different phone cards, the staff member phoned an interpreter and we passed the phone back and fourth until all was clear.

One thing to look out for in the villages is traditional toilets. The resort is equipped with our push-button thrones, however the village way is much simpler. In one café they paved the way for us by carving two foot grips on the ground – about 30cm in front of the hole. I was the only one in my group to brave this method. My advice is to hold on to the wall for support. Oh, and please do not get the urinal confused with the wash basin.

However, if you do spend most of your time on the snow fields, you will not be disappointed.

Make sure after a couple of days you venture up the Gondola lift (cable car) to the top of Rila Mountain where the scenery is magnificent. It is a perfect backdrop for a day of skiing. There's plenty of runs, quite a few challenging ones, and one rough drag lift that is just as challenging as the slopes (to stay on that is).

Make sure you are prepared for the top – a beanie is essential, along with a face mask if you have one.

Take along some food supplies – there's a couple of restaurants up there, but they have little competition. It's a long way down for a cheap coke and chocolate.

So if you feel like stepping back in time and experiencing a relaxing skiing holiday how it should be, why not taste test one of the alternate ski destinations?