

Isabel Conway revisits Pamporovo in Bulgaria and finds a revamped resort, with top-notch skiing

Pamp up the volume



FORMER SAS undercover operative turned tough crime writer Andy McNab might have dreamt up the following scene for one of his high-octane bestsellers.

With a bone-shaking thump, our plane from Belfast lands in a blacked-out former military airfield somewhere in Eastern Europe.

Surly Soviet-trained policemen in long, thick winter coats await the new arrivals in a series of prefab sheds. Exhausted after our flight, we join a freezing queue to await grudging permission to enter the country.

Welcome to a Bulgarian ski holiday of the early 1980s. That's how it was back then for young beginner skiers, daring to rise to the dubious luxury of a winter sports break.

Our leader, a young Dublin-based sports writer, hired a minibus to drive a group over the border to the foreign environs of Belfast International Airport. Skiing was still a new and exclusive class of holiday.

Andorra and Bulgaria were racing to establish themselves as the cheap and cheerful headquarters of skiing for the young and impoverished. Belfast was our gateway to the Balkans and Bulgaria's good-value package ski resort of Pamporovo was in the spectacular Rhodope Mountains.

Eventually we were allowed through customs control and herded into a ramshackle coach that took forever, negotiating rutted mountainous roads, through a blanket of pre-dawn fog. Arriving at our hotel that had an obligatory, but meaningless four-star rating, we were three girls to a room of narrow, sagging beds. The bathroom door handle fell off constantly and the shower head collapsed regularly. Cupboard space consisted of a few storage planks.

Dinner in a spartan hall was emaciated chicken wings and brown, overcooked meat. Rows of salads laid out for the

so-called buffet, framed by large platters of stone-hard, sliced white bread, were identical underneath a cover of thick 'dressing'. A fluorescent halo appeared to glow above the scary desserts.

We were not complaining. Being young and carefree, we were here for a fabulous ski holiday. After my first disastrous attempt at trying to ski a year earlier in Andorra, it all began to slowly come together in Pamporovo, thanks to

The gentle profile of the mountain is perfect for beginner snowboarders

great instruction and sympathetic slopes. I still fell over at least a dozen times in the ski school, when my snow plough just wouldn't cut it on turns. Yet what had begun as an uncertain flirtation with skiing was blooming into a proper romance.

All week, the sun shone brightly and snow conditions were perfect. The rough wine – apparently the best of it went straight to Moscow – and beer were ridiculously

cheap, we boogied (yes that was the catchphrase in those days!) into the wee hours in the hotel nightclub and surrounding village music bars and discos. Yet we still managed to manoeuvre ourselves and our skis on to the lifts for another day of fun on the slopes.

Fast forward 33 years later and a more upmarket bus drops myself and a couple of dozen multicultural skiers outside the same hotel. We've come a long way since Soviet-style concrete accommodation and meagre rations. Decades of Bulgarian independence and more recent EU membership have brought about many changes, from the standard of hotel accommodation, to the emergence of excellent, independent mountain restaurants.

The Perelik Hotel (now five-star), in Pamporovo is unrecognisable. I thought I must have stayed at a different hotel on my one and only last visit. Then I found the old staircase, with its wooden railings a little more scuffed and worn.

A large, stylish entrance hall with pastel designer fittings, soft furnishings and helpful staff sets the mood now, in place of the dark, dismal lobby.

Whizzed up to one of the eight floors of the newly renovated building by reliable elevators, I am assigned a large, comfortable

bedroom with a king-sized comfy bed, fluffy towels in a brand-new bathroom, mini bar, plasma TV and independent temperature regulation via LED display.

The Perelik was renowned from the outset for its facilities, including the resort's largest indoor swimming pool, spa, nightclub, bowling alley – and that's all still there. The facilities have been revamped, except for the bowling alley and the quirky retro red bar attached to it. Wandering into the vast restaurant offering lots of buffet choice, meals that once didn't reach gastronomic heaven all week on our half-board option are now perfectly edible, with a good wine list. So the miracle is complete.

Pamporovo is almost the southernmost ski resort in Europe, just 50 miles from the Greek Aegean and it enjoys 120 days of sunshine during winter. Just as the Perelik has undergone a transformation, so has the resort in terms of improved infrastructure, increased lifts, restaurants, good ski equipment and snow-making.

Our group of a few hundred members of SCIJ (International Ski Club of Journalists), have come to Pamporovo for our 65th annual meeting, hosted by our Bulgarian branch, the regional tourism authority and various big sponsors. Advanced skiers from snow-sure



IT'S ALL WHITE: Isabel enjoys the après-ski. The resort boasts great hotels, plenty of runs and extra slopes



skiing nations are among this mixed bag of abilities, gathered from more than 30 countries.

Pamporovo is geared more towards beginners and novices, with just a few challenging runs, including the black 'wall' from the summit to keep the experts' adrenaline flowing and, on either side, two long, fairly steep reds (unpisted when I skied them) that caused the knees a bit of a shake.

The gentle profile of the mountain, with its rounded slopes and summits, is perfect for beginner snowboarders, as well as skiers. Even when snow is scarce, snow-making keeps most runs open. Another big bonus is the quality of English language ski instruction, especially for children.

Pamporovo's landmark is its towering TV mast at Snezhanka (1,926 m), the highest point of the ski area. The terrain is set against a backdrop of forest with plenty of tree-lined runs. Lifts and slopes take skiers back to a bowl, where two main meeting points with restaurants and cafes fan out.

The longest run is a comfortable cruising 4km, with a couple of cosy cafes on the way down. We broke the journey on a sun terrace to enjoy a hot chocolate early in the day and a refreshing beer in the sunshine later, at a fraction of

the price you'd pay in the Alps.

My favourite stop-off was on the way home to the Malina 2 Ski Centre at the Two Bridges restaurant. A roaring fire and wholesome home-made food – soup for about €3, with bread and main courses for no more than €6-€8 – was the perfect end.

The good news if you opt for Pamporovo's charms is that the terrain has been extended. There's now an added ski area offering more than 20km of extra slopes at nearby Mechi Chal, accessed by regular shuttle bus and on the same area lift pass.

You always know a mass tourism destination has come of age with the ubiquitous traditional feast – promising insights into culture and gastronomy. Pamporovo has perfected the popular combination of lots of food and drink, music and dancing at Chevermeto restaurant, surrounded by a folk village. Here, we enjoyed tender, spit-roasted lamb and shepherds played Bulgaria's answer to our Uilleann pipes. Folk-dancers in multicoloured costumes cavorted around, picking members of the audience to partner them, while the food kept coming and the wine flowed. Later, a local band took the stage and belted out yet another Bulgarian stab at Eurovision. Suddenly, déjà vu... the clock was rolling back those 33 years. +

NEED TO KNOW...

- Ryanair (www.ryanair.com) flies from Dublin to Sofia, Bulgaria, a couple of times a week in winter. Group transfers to Pamporovo (four hours by road) are available by looking online.
- Half-board at the Perelik Hotel, Pamporovo, in Jan-Feb costs from €38.50pp, including buffet breakfast in a junior suite. Family packages: an area ski pass for five days costs €254 for two adults and two children.
- Crystal (www.crystal.co.uk) has a week half-board at the Perelik, departing London Gatwick on Sat 29 December for €736pp sharing, including transfers.
- From Belfast, www.travel-solutions.co.uk flies to Plovdiv (an hour and a half from Pamporovo), staying at the Perelik Hotel from €799pp half-board mid-Jan until the end of Feb 2019.

We stayed a night in Sofia, with its great restaurants, bars and shopping. Travelling on to the country's cultural capital and ancient city, Plovdiv, we stayed overnight at the Ramada Plovdiv Trimontium. Highlights include the award-winning Villa Yustina winery (<https://villayustina.com/en>) and historic sites. They included Plovdiv Roman Stadium, built in the second century, the Small Basilica, where precious Roman era mosaics were discovered and the city's Old Town, an architectural and historical reserve that harks back to the Ottoman heyday. Plovdiv is gearing up to be a European Capital of Culture in 2019.



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