

Sojourn in Soviet Sofia

by John Guilford



Golden domes crown the Alexander Nevsky Memorial Church, built in honor of Russian aid to Bulgaria's revolt against Turkish rule in 1878; official cars in foreground are all Moscow-made

THE APRON AT Vrajdebna Airport in Sofia was a torrid 92°, but not as sweltering as the heavily upholstered interior of the Ilyushin 14 airliner that brought us into the Bulgarian capital. Some of the more nervous travelers became distressed at the planeside collecting of passports by the police—a usual procedure in Communist lands—but apprehensions were allayed by the ease and politeness with which the clearance formalities were completed. Before we had even learned to say “blago darya” (thank you), we found ourselves and our luggage aboard the airport bus, passports securely back in hand.

Getting the bus moving was another story. The driver was off somewhere on another mission. Later we often encountered a Comrade elevator operator, waiter, store clerk, or driver who, contrary to the canons of Communism, was busily engaged in attending to his own needs first, and the needs of society had to take a back seat and wait.

A ride through Sofia reveals an intriguing city, a crossroads of Eastern and Western cultures abounding in lush greenery. This tidy metropolis in the heart of the Balkan peninsula was settled over two thousand years ago by the Thracian tribe of Serdi, who named the place Serdica. Later the conquering legions of the Roman Emperor Trajan occupied the town and it became an important administrative center. The big attraction to the Serdi, the Romans, and afterwards the Huns, Byzantines, and Turks has always been the thermal mineral springs, which are today still considered among the most curative in the world. Dominating the center of town is the Byzantine-styled stone structure housing the Central Baths. In a city where many old dwellings have no necessary facilities, the once-a-week attendance at the Central Baths is more than just a ritual. The salubrious water flows from taps and fountains outside the building where the citizens drink their fill and fill their drinking containers.

Sofia, little known to Western travelers and closed to Americans for a decade after the rupture of U. S.-Bulgarian relations in 1950, numbers 700,000 inhabitants. The word *bulgar* or *bougar* meant “cultivating peasant,” and this holds

true today with 80% of the country's population engaged in the overwhelmingly agricultural economy. Half of the area of Bulgaria is arable and two thirds of those lands have been collectivized by the Communist regime. The peasants traditionally have had a passion for freeholding, and their conversion to collectivism has been coolly unenthusiastic.

Bulgaria has been orbiting in the Soviet sphere since 1945 as the satellite most closely tied to Russia through ethnic, linguistic, and religious bonds. After being an outpost province of the Turkish Empire for 500 years, Bulgaria has circumnavigated the political compass after launching herself to independence from the Turks with Russian help in 1878. After seventy years of monarchic self-rule, and siding with Germany in two World Wars, Bulgaria today is the southernmost outpost of the Soviet Empire.

Picturesquely fanning out from the foot of Mount Vitocha, the capital gives one the impression of a quiet, orderly city with an air of austerity. Its massive architecture—Roman, Byzantine, and Modern in a verdant setting—reflects the backdrop of massive Vitocha and its green-forested cape. The austerity of Sofia expresses itself in two ways: in temperament and in economy. The Bulgar character is virile, serious, and dogged. Frivolous humor and excessive gayety are traits alien to him. The temper of the times throws an even sharper light on his earnestly sober face.

Austerity in the economy is easily understood when the average Bulgarian worker earns an amount roughly equivalent to \$100 a month, and so many necessities are priced to the point of strain for him to reach. Luxury items are removed from this possibility: a small refrigerator or wringer-type washing machine requiring over a month's pay, a bicycle or radio requiring over three weeks' pay, a man's suit over three weeks' pay, a pound of beef over an hour's work, and a pound of sugar a little under.