

fascinating sight. The arrival of a Cadillac or a Bentley outside the Hotel Balkan can instantly collect a crowd of admirers—adults and children. Most of the traffic on the main thoroughfares consists of buses, coupled-trams, and Russian-made autos like the Moskvich, Volga, or the Red diplomats' favorite, the Zis.

The Hotel Balkan is Sofia's pride. A 200-room hostelry built in 1957, it is the last word in Bulgarian elegance, with plush pastel carpeting and marble staircases. No less than four restaurants and one banquet hall attract the free-spenders of an evening, who dine for hours in traditional East European style. Later they sedately fox trot in the banquet hall to an unflagging band blaring a far-flung repertoire of jazz, love songs, and ballads that range from Tin Pan Alley to Moscow's Gorki Street.

Outside the banquet hall in the courtyard of the hotel the nightly syncopation echoes from the ancient walls of the Church of St. George, the oldest structure in Sofia, dating back to the Fourth Century. An archeologist's dream, it once was a Roman bath, later became a Turkish mosque.

With the Hotel Balkan the center of Sofia social activity, an imposing building opposite on the meticulously landscaped square is the center of the political activity of the country. Topped by a giant red star, citadel-like in Stalin Era style of architecture, the building houses behind its doors the headquarters of the Bulgarian Communist Party.

But the most frequented establishment in all Sofia stands opposite both the former buildings. A block-square, four-story department store called "Tsum," it is the center of all shopping activity in town. This may be an exaggeration.

To this observer, at least, among the hundreds of visitors who browse through the aisles and dawdle at the counters, few turn out to be customers.

A look at some of the prices and it is not surprising. In dollar equivalents—and bearing in mind that the average Bulgarian earns one fourth what the average American does—men's shoes cost \$15, a shirt \$5, a pair of nylons \$4, a nail clipper \$1.50, a television set \$260, and a 4-cylinder Moskvich \$2400. The sprawling emporium, with its wide corridors and sombre dark-brown walls, stocks goods running the gamut from matches to Moskviches, but items are often duplicated at counters throughout the store. The greatest volume of business that we saw transacted, however, was at the ice cream stand on the ground floor, where a milling crowd shelled out 40 *stotinki* each (roughly 40c) for a two-inch square ice-cream sandwich.

Among the less frequented institutions in Sofia are the houses of worship, of which there are a number of very impressive ones. The Byzantine classic, sturdily-constructed Church of St. Sofia, which gave the city its name and which once was the residence of the Turkish Governor-General, is scantily attended by elderly devotionists. The golden domes of the unforgettably beautiful Alexander Nevsky Memorial Church can be seen for miles around. This Orthodox cathedral, built in memory of the Russians who aided Bulgaria's liberation from the Turks, is replete with priceless works of art—mosaics, carvings, icons, and murals—that leave one in awed breathlessness. But the vast interior only accentuates the absence of worshipers. Far more visitors find their way to this magnificent church.

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