

ARCH Project NET

Managing our Natural and Cultural Assets



A report of a visit to Bulgaria

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Introduction

EARLY SATURDAY MORNING 11 July I set off to meet seven other people from similar professional backgrounds to my own, the arts, culture and heritage. All of us, in one way or another, involved in providing interpretation and learning for those who visit or interact with our respective organizations.

We were chosen by *Archnetwork* in Scotland, part of Project NET, for an *Erasmus* funded cultural and historical heritage exchange visit and our destination was Bulgaria. The European Erasmus exchanges are to help transfer ideas and spread knowledge and good practice throughout the continent. It is a worthy ideal, and as a former academic now working in heritage learning, one I fully subscribe to.

The aim of this visit is for us to come to understand the cultural impacts of ancient peoples on contemporary societies and how their ancient skills are still applicable today. But first we would have to see for ourselves the legacies of ancient Thracian, Macedonian and Roman cultures on art and architecture by means of the archaeology and ethnography of the places we visited, of which there turned out to be no shortage. We would also look at the history of the local peoples, war and invasion.

I was very interested in how others interpret and use their cultural assets to educate local people and visiting tourists alike; to see how cultural tourism works in Bulgaria. It was important to view how modern ceramics and other crafts such as weaving and jewellery-making relate to the earlier cultures and the skills they used.

It is also important for me to investigate the sustainability of contemporary cultures, how they source natural materials for buildings, manufacture and agriculture, how do they produce their food?

I hoped to be able to take home some new ideas on how local products make use of their great historical legacies.

What follows is a diary account of this journey around 20 or so different sites, museums and galleries including walk-arounds in local towns and villages. All of them were immensely interesting and it could take months to write about them all properly so, as time is limited to posting this report, I will mention them all, but concentrate on those places that inspired me and fulfilled my personal aims and objectives for this trip (in keeping with Erasmus, of course). I will relate what I feel I have my learned in the Conclusions at the end of this document.

I apologise in advance for the typographic errors (there must be lots).

Saturday 11 Sofia

WE ARRIVED IN Sofia and met Velis, our guide for the trip. Velis, it turned out, is one of the best heritage guides I have ever come across. I cannot remember a single question going unanswered even when it meant her researching the answer later. Ivo, our driver, drove us all to the Hotel in the middle of Sofia, a 1960s slab-block of a building; its modernity already fading.

Before dinner Velis took us all on a stroll around the city centre and the roman ruins under the streets there – a delightful experience. Sofia is a city of contrasts with overly grandiose structures from the communist era alongside some prettier modern buildings, and all juxtaposed with older and ancient designs. I enjoyed how relatively easily Bulgarian seemed to make feature of their spectacular archaeological discoveries – they are very proud of them. After this short introductory walk around the centre of town we went back to the hotel. Dinner downstairs in the hotel was very good, as was the wine. Already Bulgaria was a nice place to be. Hotel Room was comfortable enough, apart from the loud music from the street below – good to know young folk are the same the world over – when I did fall asleep, I slept well enough.

Sunday 12 Plovdiv



WE SET OUT early and drove south-east to an excellent small city that we know now as *Plovdiv* – a city with an artistic philosophy at its core. It is believed people have settled around here for at least 8,000 years. Where after first viewing a Thracian east gate of *Philippopol*. Philippopol is an ancient name of Plovdiv as is the Roman town built on this site *Trimontium*.

This ruined road obviously continued under local house we walk uphill to visit an artists studio whose back garden was an wonderful Roman ruin. A further walk up through the fascinating old town, along heavily cobbled streets and past beautiful old buildings and churches, brought us eventually to one of the most spectacular ancient buildings I have ever seen, Plovdiv's ancient amphitheatre. It was becoming very obvious to us that you can hardly throw a spade into the soil in Bulgaria without finding some ancient relic of Thracian, Roman or Greek building or road.

the school on top of the hill when trying to create a new sport ground hit the top stone of this theatre. The removal of around 10,000 cubic metres of hillside uncovered the rest of it.



Sitting on the steps taking in the magnificent view out past the colonnade across the town below and off into the distance, the sounds of people talking coming up from the stage area was very clear. Then, something unexpected and very special happened, a number of singers from a Japanese choir down on the stage began to sing. The harmonies were quite beautiful and created a very moving few moments. We walked down to the *Kapana* and had a nice lunch together.

I will say here that almost all the food we had eaten so far were local dishes all made with locally sourced food. After lunch we went on a walk around town where we saw more roman ruins, once again incorporated into the main street as a feature of the town.

Plovdiv is a very pretty town I felt very comfortable there and enjoyed very much my walk around the (newer) town centre as much as I did the old town. It appears that Plovdiv will be European Capital of Culture in 2019, almost 30 years after my own town of Glasgow's City of Culture festival which I had been heavily involved in. It was a nice connection with the place.



LATER IN THE afternoon we traveled north to the spa town of *Hisarya*. Hisarya is an interesting town. The imposing 5-4th c. BC Thracian and later Roman ruins are a spectacular sight. We all enjoyed a very tasty, and locally sourced, dinner where we were joined by Dr. Mitko Madzharov, director of the archaeological museum, and its curator, Radka Nankina. After dinner, we walked out to look at the ruins. It was dark, but the buildings (bath houses) were lit by spotlights. There was an enjoyable moment when the frogs below us began singing. Our group croakily sang back and a raucous chorus ensued in the dark for a few minutes. There were many bats around and in the lights of the roman baths they gave us quite a spectacular flying display. These were quite large bats around the size of a starling and by their flying patterns may have been Noctules, though it is difficult to say without actually hearing them. At this end of a long hot day, we all headed back to the hotel and bade each other good night.

Monday 13 Hisarya (formerly *Diocletianopolis*)



AFTER BREAKFAST WE walked through the *Camel Gate* towards the Archaeological Museum within the ancient town. The Camel Gate, so named due to the ruin looking like two camels, has been partially restored and is an imposing structure with the remains of soldiers barracks on either side of it.

It strikes you almost immediately that the site of these Hisarya settlements is an obvious one given the springs that flow freely here. One spring at 36° C is almost hot enough to bathe in, obviously starting its journey far under ground with a direct pathway to the surface allowing it to retain the heat. Other springs here are quite cool suggesting a slower journey to the surface. Townspeople all make good use of the springs .

The walls of this town are not exactly straight following the contours of the landscape therefore the East and West gates are misaligned. there is a second outer wall on the north side that is believed to be 4th century AD. We walked through the camel gate towards the Ethnographic and Archaeological Museum near the centre of the town. We were treated to a tour of the collections by Ms Nankina a pleasant and knowledgeable guide.

The museum itself is a neat collection of small buildings. The exhibits are well laid out, but I felt the interpretation, while reasonably clear, did not tell the story of the area well as I believe it could. I thought there was too much emphasis on the input of a guide to interpret the museum. While many folk like to be guided around



museums, like others, I sometimes prefer to wander, look and read on my own. I don't think that I would have got as much from the experience without the excellent guide. However, that is simply an operational problem that can be easily fixed. Also, it may just be my problem as this is a small museum and too much interpretation might take away from the actual exhibits, but I think it might be worth having a look at this.



At the end of the museum tour and that around the ruins and the spectacular Thracian tomb, I began to understand better the roles in history of the Thracians, and the impacts of the Roman Empire on the local culture and architecture. As an added bonus, the temporary exhibition of the models for theatrical costumes was a wonderful display. I have a partnership with the fashion and design department of a local college where the students as part of their coursework, make period costumes for our interpretation at Pollok House. These



students would have adored this exhibition as would many of our staff and volunteers at the House, I certainly did. It also gave me a great idea on craftwork with children. I thought it a great pity that they felt this museum had too little space to allow for a children's activity space as I felt the museum could provide excellent learning and activity programmes on local archaeology and the crafts for schools as well as family learning events.



Starosel

FROM HISARYA WE headed back west 20k to *Starosel* and its *Thracian Cult Complex* dating from the late 4th – early 3rd century BC; around the time of the Thracian king Sitalk – ruler of the Odrisian Kingdom.



Starosel, after the village *Staro Selo* in the Troyan area, is situated on the slopes of the Central Highlands of Bulgaria with spectacular views across this Thracian valley. Our first port of call was to the temple/tomb *Chetiniova Mogila*, an imposing structure reputedly the largest found so far in the Balkans. Built of large ashlar stone the whole complex uses no mortar but is finely worked and held

together with lead-coated copper rods – it is very impressive stonework. The roof of the tomb had fallen in but has been restored and shows even now the quality of painting and images with the spiritual and symbolic colours of red blue and black. Red for this life Black for the underworld and blue for the heavens.

Carved into the stonework around the openings and friezes is the famous egg and dart motif favoured by the famous 19th-century Scottish architect, Alexander “Greek” Thomson.

The sheer skill and craftsmanship in the building of this tomb was quite incredible. The whole building consists of a façade, an



anti-chamber and the inner sactum. The walls in the sanctum are decorated with semi-pillars with each segment of the pillar actually carved as part of the wall block. The carved stones are volcanic tuff almost like sandstone and relatively easy to work, while granite is also used due to its toughness and weather resistance. The whole mound is surrounded by a Greek style *crepidoma* said to be 240 metres circumference. The stonework throughout is so neatly fitted you would struggle to get a thin sheet of paper into the joins. This was a real joy to behold. Added to this, the views from this tomb across the plain below are quite spectacular.



We went about a mile back down the hillside to a second tomb/temple. Made of the same materials as the larger tomb this is a much smaller structure consisting of a open rectangular chamber with a small room contained within it. The rectangular chamber appeared to have a U-shaped roof around the sides and front of the small room which had a roof of its own. This U-shaped roof was supported by 10 early-Doric style columns; by all accounts these are unusual for this time and place. We left the Thracian Cult Complex and drove to the winery at Starosel.

The winery certainly took me by surprise. It is very modern. The cellar was absolutely amazing having been built as a huge mock Thracian tomb and looked properly authentic. Artists had recreated carvings in the stone and sitting in thee sampling Bulgaria's finest and delicious produce was a real treat. Our superb young guide told us all their wines were sold to Russia was a real

disappointment; she is now under orders to sell some to Glasgow wine merchants. In the meantime we all bought some and left quite happy.

Tuesday 14 Kazanlak

AFTER AN EARLY breakfast we headed off to Kazanlak, but first we decided to visit the Rose Distillery at Karlovo on the way there.

Rosa damascene, Damask Rose was first brought to Bulgaria by Alexander the Great's troops. It seem these roses grew better in the Balkans than in its native Persia. Essential oils, especially rose oil, distilled since the early 17th century is a source of national pride in Bulgaria, so it was fitting that we made the effort to go t here, take the tour and buy some oil. Not only was the tour of the distillery and the distilling process very interesting, but there was an excellent ethnographic exhibition at the back of the distillery showing some of the older machinery and other artifacts. This

was an unexpected delight and highlighted the pride local folk have in their craft, culture and heritage. A modern and efficient distillery set amid beautiful grounds that almost had the feel of a theme park, and that excellent ethnographic museum. There is so much scope throughout this complex for children's learning interpreting local history as part of schools programmes.



We were told it takes over one million flowers (3.5 tonnes) to produce 1kg of the oil or, one rose = 1mg of oil. The distillery has an interesting collection of birds around the pond at the back. Black swans pintail ducks and I saw my first *Tree Sparrow* for many, many years there.

Like the winery, the Rose Distillery has had a lot of money invested in it, and as well as being a site of production is also a very beautiful place. These two areas of production are big exporters for Bulgaria and use their cultural heritage as a major selling point – the great quality of their products notwithstanding. We left and aimed for Kazanlak to arrive at lunchtime.

KAZANLAK IS A PLEASANT town very much at home with itself. In fact, and a week is no time at all to gauge such things, Bulgarians as a whole seemed to be quite laid back and reasonably happy people.

There was an interesting photographic exhibition in the town square that promoted art, crafts, education and many other aspects of local life in the area. The photography was beautiful and well displayed and the whole things simple as it was gave a great impression of the beauty and character of the people and the local area. We did not have a lot of time but I had some difficulty dragging myself away from the display. I did, however, and finally had a nice lunch, again a refreshing salad made of local produce and cool spring water locally sourced. Me and the rest of the group were swiftly getting a taste for the delicious local fresh made breads.

Onwards then to the Museum of History – Iskra (Spark) to meet Plamen Stefanov vice-director and curator of the museum. Plamen is an exceptional decent fellow and he gave us a tour of the museum with a talk about its permanent exhibitions of archaeology and ethnology alongside modern history. There are



many fascinating items from Thracian era including ceramics, jewellery all from the past history of Kazanlak were very interesting. The exhibitions take us through the ages from Neolithic, chalcolithic and early bronze through Thracian culture in the “Blessed” valley of Kazanlak. I was particularly amazed at the bone sickles which I had never seen before.



There was a lot to see in a short period of time, but the museum is well laid out with interpretation in four languages: Bulgarian, English, French and German. I got a little out of sync with the rest of the group by taking many photographs but I never lost the “story” of

the collection as it was all quite nicely joined up.

There was a nicely animated film on the history of Thracian rulers showing in the foyer of the museum which we sat and watched. Later we had a bit of circle time with a question and answer forum.

A young curator for the Museum of Music waxed lyrical about the famous Bulgarian composer, Petko Staynov (1896-1977), and his music. He did not have answers to many of the questions we asked, but Plamen Stefanov answered many of the things we wanted to know: annual numbers to the museum, what selling points they use and learning for school children. This was a very interesting, informative and well laid out museum.



Afterwards Plamen presented us with an information pack on the museum and took us over to the Thracian tomb of Kazanlak, or should I say we walked past the Tomb and visited an exact replica of it as the original tomb is a protected UNESCO World Heritage Site and is far too easily damaged. However, the replica is beautifully made and was a very interesting piece to investigate.

We left Plamen at the site of the tomb and headed north again to go over the mountains to Gabrovo. This drive took us through the Shipka Pass, a drive I was looking forward to.

IT MAY SEEM a digression to talk about the Shipka Pass here, but the fascination for me is that we have a small street near the old centre of my home town of Glasgow called Shipka Pass. The street was latterly a kind of flea market with many humorous signs such as “We buy rubbish; we sell antiques”, “Knickers are down this week”, and many football jokes.

Glasgow was an Empire City and many of its streets are named after famous heroes and battles. This little street commemorates the battles of Shipka Pass which always intrigued me as a small boy as Britain was not involved in the Russo-Turkish war.

Glasgow is a city almost wholly made up of immigrants and there may well have been Russian or Bulgarian influence in the town in the late 19th century that prompted the naming, but I cannot find reference to this.

Glasgow’s Shipka Pass is on a major access road to Celtic Park where the Bulgarian footballer Stilian Petrov became a firm favourite with Celtic fans.

The journey through the Pass was very like traveling through some tree-lined mountain passes in Scotland, which pleased me even more.

On the way to Gabrovo we stopped at the Freedom Monument with its spectacular views all around. The “Saucer” was visible on another mountain top some miles away.

We arrived at our Hotel in Etara late afternoon and got settled in to our rooms before meeting up for a wander around the ethnographic museum before our official visit next day.

On our wander in the dark we stumbled on an open air theatre for local folk. Obviously it was an age-old tale as we could follow the story even though we did not speak the language.



Wednesday 15 Etara (Gabrovo)

WHAT CAN I SAY about the Ethnographic Complex at Etara? Only that, for me, this is the perfect museum experience (if museum is even the right word). The Complex is set on a beautiful small valley floor, that reminded me so much of Perthshire back home (except it was sunny here), and sits astride the Sivek river. I have been to open air working museums before and enjoyed them, but this ethnographic complex just felt much more authentic – it was alive with real people doing real things, not just guides pretending. Machines, water powered from a canal above, were being used by artisans, and crafts people all along the craft lane, a beautifully reconstructed street, were plying their trades – these folk were all very good at their trades – visitor interaction is definitely encouraged here. So, talk to the artisans, buy their wares.

Learn the history of the local area and its people, and all in an interesting, fun and enjoyable way. They also cater for the hobby tourist with workshops in many of the crafts seen here. We watched as Dina told us about dyeing with natural dyes from plants has been familiar to people since ancient times. She



showed us the blossoms, leaves and roots of various plants that are used for obtaining of the dye substance. The colours can be deep or pastel-like, with faded shades. We did a simple bit of plaiting with some of the dyed wool.

I liked the moulds carved into big stones for bell making. My notes are a bit scribbled here, but I think if a bell has a *Throtki* sound is it not good, but should be *Klopka* and such bells are used by the magnificently dressed, and masked *Kukeri* to chase off evil spirits.

We watched as wood-turners created small pots on the water powered lathes, and silversmiths made beautiful jewellery on the benches in front of us. The silversmiths use three different types of processes to create the jewellery: Mudcasts; Filigree and beating, all types were on display in the workshops. The bagpipe shop intrigued us and the pipes were not too dissimilar to the ones we are used to in Scotland. One of group, a folk musician, became very interested in a *Kaval* a type of flute. We also looked at the works of the coppersmith. We were introduced to the Walnut oil distillery which was not unlike the process we saw at the ethnographic display at the rose distillery, unfortunately they do not have enough walnuts to go through the process. It was explained that the walnuts are crushed, baked, boiled pressed and filtered through woolen bags as part of the distillation process.



The whole Complex at Etara is interpreted extremely well ... but, the place really does speak for itself. However, there was a row of information boards on stands beyond the clock tower that I felt were a bit out of place. There, that's my one gripe. But, oh, to be sitting again on that verandah in that little

coffee shop drinking Turkish coffee with my new friend, Stuart, and watching the world wander by on the street below. Surely, this is how it was for the local merchants in Gabrovo?

The range and quality of the water powered machines here are an interpreter's dream. The carpet washing machine is actually used by local folk and the brightly coloured carpets hanging to dry belonged to them.



It costs about 40 pence to have your carpet cleaned which makes you part of the interpretation for the duration of the cleaning and drying – talk about local buy-in? You can also have your maize ground on the water-powered mills for pennies too.

This place even has its own hotel, bar and restaurant. This might make it all sound like some tacky theme park, it certainly is not. Learning and educating is at the very core of the philosophy here; the point is never missed. We had a meeting with Dr Svetla Dimitrova the director and Tsevi Kateva and Rossi Bineva, curators of the Museum who explained their philosophies and policies and hopes for the future of Etara. They answered our questions as fully as they could and it was obvious that the staff are very knowledgeable and highly committed to Etara. It was a little troubling to hear that there are problems with maintaining the Etara complex due to the lack of ancient and traditional skills such as metalworkers, millworkers and cow bell makers. I say troubling as we are having the every same problems in Scotland with stonemasonry, carpentry and plasterers who know how to make and apply the proper materials. This, of course has to be dealt with on a national level, but it needs to be done soon both in Bulgaria and Scotland and, I suspect, elsewhere.



As you might imagine, there are many programmes here for children and families; there is a dedicated section of the complex solely for kids (of all ages as it turned out) to learn and have fun. There is a full schools programme at Etara where ethnography is an important element and children are encouraged to study ethnography to help reduce problems between cultures.

So, what did I learn? I learned that I need to get my bosses to fight harder for access to the water powered sawmill and the soon-to-be-refurbished hydro power plant at Pollok House.

For me Etara is a five star complex – I had real fun here – could it get any better on this trip?

Thursday 16 Gabrovo

IN THE MORNING we went to *The House of Humour* in Gabrovo was a bit of a relief for me as it was a more light-hearted affair and Galina Boneva, the curator treated us to a walk and talk around the museum. However, light-hearted is not imply that there is not a serious side to this museum, because there certainly is. As many of the artists on display ensure. Humour as we all know can be a poisonous dart in the side of po-faced, dour politicians and despots.



This House of Fun certainly relates to the local culture in that a self-deprecating sense of humour is highlighted here. The humour is born out of the thriftiness of Gabrovians. most likely primarily cast by outsiders, but readily taken up by local Gabrovians themselves who would know the difference between practical thrift and meanness. The tension between the two views creates the humour.



This is a fine museum, and I particularly liked the exhibition by contemporary artists. Many Bulgarian artists provide an insight into the reawakening of a nation after 45 years of a marshal type rule and its socio-economic and cultural impacts on the Country. Humour can be a great catalyst for change and there are many other artists displayed here from all over the world telling the same kinds of stories. There was quite a lot in the museum for children and places that allow them to have fun interacting with exhibits, I know I certainly did. Children learn best when they are happy and having fun. Did I learn anything here? No, not really, but some of my own thoughts on things were reinforced by some of the exhibits. An enjoyable experience.

AFTER WE LEFT Gabrovo, we drove north to *Sevlievo Hotalich* where we picnicked for lunch amid the ruins of a township below a medieval fortress. This was quite extensive with around 90 houses of which most of the toppled walls had been built up to about three feet in order for the buildings to be more prominent and viewable. I thought this was unnecessary. I am not sure of the intentions of the current management of the site as it tends to be



presented in a preservative manner rather than conserved. Both styles are valid, of course, but I think this needs to be cleared up. Two buildings have been completely replicated which are now used as interpretation rooms with costumes and other artefacts on show, and good additional boarded interpretation. They certainly give a feel for how these buildings would have been like. Nadia Boteva, the archaeologist, took us on a tour of the site starting with the church down the hill and then up to the replica buildings. The fort itself is situated on top of a 600m hill and we set off up the pathway towards it. It has to be said that it was past midday and the temperature was over 35° C, the high 90s Fahrenheit. I was beginning to overheat with the climb and I am afraid I did not make it to the top. About two thirds of the way up, at the gateway to the fort I gave up.



The rest of the group went on, but I walked around the building at his location and read a bit of the history here – it seems no-one bothered to remember who the local rulers were during this period. There was a cool shaded seat across a small bridge and I sat there drinking water and looking down on the township below and the spectacular views of the rest of the valley.

What did strike me during my little sit-down protest was how much biodiversity there was around me: plants, birds, insects, butterflies and small reptiles. Not just the variety, but the abundance of them. I became very happy sitting there in solitude with natural Bulgaria all around me.



All in all, it was an interesting visit. We all met up back at base camp drank every last drop of water we had and after thanking our excellent guide we headed off southwest towards Troyan. We reached Vili and Encho's EkoArt guest house about an hour later.

Friday 17 Oreshak

THE NATIONAL ARTS and crafts exhibition in Oreshak is laid out in an attractive setting. I could see it was still growing as I sat in the cool shade and watched builders creating a new pavilion on the grounds. The museum works hard to promote local artists and crafts people. I think we could do with more of this type of thing in the UK, but then, Bulgaria appears to like and respect artistry and skilled craftworks, as well as the folk who create it, both historic and contemporary.

Many of the exhibits were great to look at, but it did not take long to make my way around what was pretty much a shop – which obviously gave me time to buy some very nice handcrafted jewellery. The workshops with Ivan Chakarov, was however, interesting and entertaining. I will say here and now that, not being a man who likes to reinvent the wheel, I have unashamedly stolen one of his good ideas for work with children in my museum.

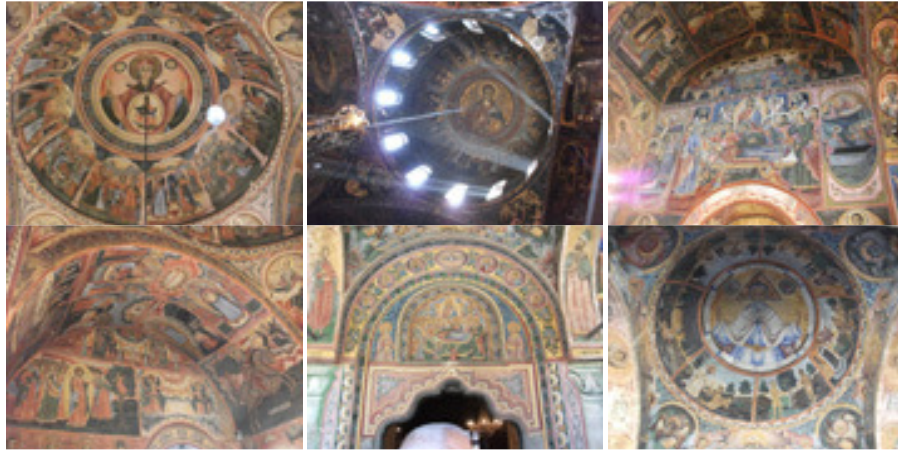


After Ivan gave a talk on what he does in the museum we wandered round his gallery amid some of his wood craft and other ethnographic exhibits such as weaving looms. The contemporary ceramics and textiles were wonderful there was an interesting and enjoyable mix in the room.

Ivan demonstrated for us some pyrography and we all had a go. I can't draw to save myself, but I did have fun trying.

We left the workshop after an hour or so and headed to the Troyan monastery a couple of kilometers along the road. I won't say much about it except to say I found

the artworks and murals very impressive, they are by the famous Bulgarian artist, Zahari Zograf, I believe. I provide here some photographs of these that I took on a walk around.



Kirsty and I found a small door at the side of the monastery which was open with stairs leading down to the basement. I don't think it should have been open for the public, but curiosity took us over and we found ourselves in the ossuary the remains were of monks. Taking a photo was irresistible – we paid our respects and left.

After our visit to the monastery we headed into the centre of Troyan for some lunch before visiting The Museum of Folk Crafts Troyan.



The Museum of Folk Crafts Troyan

OF ALL THE MUSEUMS we visited on our trip around central Bulgaria the Museum at Troyan was the one I thought was most clearly interpreted and presented. Considering all the wonderful things we had seen on this trip, that is a big statement for me to make.



The curator, Desi Vutova, met us as we entered and took us on a tour of the museum and its exhibits and I found it fascinating. Why does this museum stand out from the others? Not simply that Ms Vutova was a charming, knowledgeable and interesting young woman, but that the interpretation of the exhibits was first class using boards, scaled-models and life-sized replicas of workshops and homes containing original materials, tools and other artefacts.



Other museums had a good mixture of these too, but I felt this museum linked them all together best. It all conspired to present us with such a well-presented and interpreted museum exhibition. It would be easy enough to take a self-guided tour of it and come out the other end a much more knowledgeable person for the experience. As it was, Ms Vutova added much cream to the pudding and that is why in the Museum of Folk Craft stands out as the highlight of the week for me.

The Troyan exhibition is presented as a coherent story of the arts and crafts of a nation from antiquity to the present day. That many Bulgarian crafts-people purposely retain the utilitarian aspects of their produce while preserving the aesthetics of their craft is something many other cultures, in an increasingly industrial world, appear to



have lost – much to the regret of many. This may be the reason why a jug is no longer simply a jug in Bulgaria, but seen by so many as a work of art.

Continuing the traditions of Indo-Persian craftsmen, modern Bulgarians create ceramics of a very high quality and design. The huge variety of shape and design highlights the Old Bulgarian style of light wheel pottery, subsequently adopted by the Slavs.

Bulgarian design is frequently adorned with same symbols found on buildings and tiles such as: runes, geometric forms and floral designs etc. These signs tended to reflect the spiritual and sacred important to the potters themselves.



On display were fine examples of ceramics from the first Bulgarian empire period (680-1018). By the end of the 14th century Bulgaria was occupied by the Ottoman Empire and the Bulgarian state ceased to exist. This began stagnation in Bulgarian ceramics which retain their mediaeval characteristics, but ceased to develop further during the Ottoman period. However, inspired by imported Oriental ceramics master potters began to incorporate new shapes and designs in their own ceramics which turned their works into a perceived

folk art. These newer designs had their own local styles and techniques which eventually resulted in the celebrated contemporary Bulgarian ceramic schools we know now.

In the Bulgarian Revival period (18th and 19th centuries) ceramic vessels were designed on a more practical basis; undergoing changes in shape, decoration and volume. These were intended to be practical and useful in everyday life. They were simple in design but made with a spirit and vitality reflecting the master craftsman's personal spirituality, and reflecting his own outlook on life. It is easy then, to see how these came to be seen as works of art – especially a little later when they adopted the painting style of Zahari Zograf, creator of the murals on the Troyan Monastery (among others), and is arguably the most famous of all Bulgarian painters.



It was good to hear of the work the museum does with schools and families. It was also good to hear how a similar trip to Scotland gave the curator here ideas for her schools programme in Troyan.

We were also given a tour of the building next door which was, apparently, the only building left standing after the rest of the buildings in this part of town were set ablaze by the bashi-bazouks in August 1877. The house is now an ethnographic museum and a gallery with works of local famous artists, each with their own room for display.

This also was an interesting and enjoyable exhibition. We were taken to a gallery after this, but I found it to be quite boring ... shame really.

We went out and visited the atelier of a local artist, Milko Dachev, and had a chat with him about his paintings – after which, he treated us to some light refreshments in his garden. It was pleasant interlude near the end of what felt like quite a long day.

Saturday 18 Sofia

THE NATIONAL POLYTECHNIC MUSEUM is a brave attempt at highlighting the industrial age in Bulgaria. They try to focus on Bulgarian contribution to modern industry, but there appears to be not enough artefacts available for this and the emphasis ends more on the global aspects of these.

Svetozara Kararadeva met us as we entered, and she took us on a tour of the museum. There are many interesting exhibits including a Messerschmitt car I remembered so fondly from my youth – this is, of course, German. The museum is set out in an easy to follow route around the ages of modern era industry from power generation, shipping, cars (Bulgaria did have one year of car manufacture with Renault in the 1970s), Radio and Television, Communications and Bulgaria's contribution to the space race with much of the foodstuffs for cosmonauts made here. It was an interesting enough exhibition, but I feel it needs more focus on Bulgaria itself ... or maybe not, it could just be me.



There is a lot for children and young people here and has a dedicated children's corner (Physics at Work) which I liked. All museums should have such a thing; many do, but not enough.



We were told that 20,000 children a year attend the museum's schools programmes – an impressive number. The programmes focus on physics e.g. electricity with demonstrations etc. There are historic working power generation models exhibited in the museum.

The museum has 22 paid staff with volunteers. It earns extra income from hiring out space to film crews and cinema production. The journey around the museum took about two hours.

We bade Svetozara farewell and headed off for lunch after which we had the hotel phone us taxis and we went to the National Museum of Socialism.

THE NATIONAL MUSEUM OF SOCIALISM also known as The "Museum of the totalitarian art" which consists of a sculpture park where there are exposed statues of communist functionaries such as Lenin, Stalin, Georgi Dimitrov among others including one of Che Guevara. I think there are slightly less than 80 statues here.



There is also a gallery building where an extremely pleasant and helpful guide explained that the museum is trying to collect, preserve and display all forms of art related to the 1944-1989 period of socialism in Bulgaria. This makes the museum quite unique, certainly in Europe, but possibly the world.

The museum is quite a bit out from the centre of the city but it was relatively easy to get to (once the taxi driver got directions). It is certainly worth visiting if you have an interest in such things, but you should not expect to have to spend too much time there. This was an unexpected pleasure to visit this small museum, and it put a cherry on top of the very excellent Bulgarian cake we journeyed through over the week.

Flight times meant we had to stay in Sofia an extra night. We spent it walking around the centre of town visiting churches and ruins and walk onto a Bollywood film set just as the baddies seemed to be getting their comeuppance in an action shot with a car chase.

After a nice meal we spent some time in the city centre experiencing another typical noisy Saturday night among the good citizens and young folk of Sofia. A fine place with fine people and yes, the beer was good too.

Conclusions

FIRST OF ALL I wish to say that we were looked after wonderfully on the trip by the very excellent Libby Urquhart of Archnetwork in Scotland and Velislava Chilingirova (Velis) and our driver Ivo; they are all top of the tree in the work they do with groups such as ours. The work Libby did in making sure all the travel arrangement ensured we arrived safely and on time going and returning for a group of unrelated and disparate folk from all over the country is no mean feat. Velis and Ivo in Bulgaria kept us to the busy and intensive programme throughout the week. It was a lot of hard work for all of them and they cannot be praised highly enough.

In concluding this report, I hope somewhere in all the swiftly written babble that has gone before, there is the idea that I got a huge amount from this trip. Not just from what we saw and what was related to us by our own guide and those at the museums and other sites, which was a lot, but simply by being with like-minded people with similar backgrounds. This was an excellent and good humoured band of fellow travellers to spend time with. I think we also learned quite a lot from each other.

I knew very little about Bulgaria before I set off and I deliberately did not read beyond the brief we were given in the hope that the country would surprise me. It did not disappoint – this was truly and eye-opening experience – Bulgaria is a spectacular country with a fantastic culture and great heritage. So too have many places, but from my understanding through listening to what people were saying, Bulgarians are very proud of it. I love the way they readily display what they find around themselves and simply make a feature of it. The sheer wealth of archaeological and social heritage and places to show it to themselves and the world also bears this out.

Museums are what museums are, and much depends on those tasked with managing and presenting them. For the most part I think Bulgaria's cultural resources are run very well, but some, as you might expect, are much better presented to the public than others. However, nothing disappointed me; there are no negatives to take away from this trip. There were places that stood out for me: the amphitheatre was a great sight to come upon surrounded as it is by the old town of Plovdiv – I just simply loved the town of Plovdiv and would really like to return there, if not before, then in 2019 when it is a European Capital of Culture.

Etara was spectacular; I loved the whole experience there. The whole place is one big learning project. It is extremely interesting, fun and very enjoyable, but with a lot of serious intent behind it. People should book long weekends there in their Hotel.

The Museum of Folk Crafts in Troyan is quite simply a wonderful museum. If your aim is to show off your local history you should visit this museum and take notes; I would love to see something of similar quality in every major town in Scotland.

I have to say that the Polytechnic Museum in Sofia bothered me a little. It is a good enough museum; things are well enough interpreted and presented so I am still not sure why it left me a bit cold. I am a former engineer in the petro-chemical industries and I should have been more interested in this, but I wasn't, nothing really pushed my buttons in here. The little cars at the entrance were great, but nothing else really lived up to them the further we went through. There is something missing here and I still cannot put my finger on it –

maybe it was the building itself. I did feel that with such a huge potential for young people's learning the museum should not concentrate solely on the past, but look to the future too. The museum is uniquely positioned to attract young people into becoming interested in future renewable industries, with discussions and demonstrations on how power generation can be developed in their future – all that wonderful culture and heritage needs to take you some place.

I mentioned Biodiversity in the report. While we visited Bulgaria to learn about its culture and heritage, as an ecologist and environmental scientist who now works in a different field I got very excited by the sheer diversity and volume of the local flora and fauna; so too did my colleague, a former biodiversity officer, Chris Waddell. A rich biodiversity can be a tourist attraction in on its own right, and Bulgaria's is as spectacular as it is due to its rural culture. As Bulgaria begins to open up further to tourism I sincerely hope that biodiversity is included in the development plans so that new tourist industries develop sustainably and retain their wonderful and spectacular diversity (or spice) of life. It really is a precious thing – Bulgaria has a most wonderful opportunity here.

This trip had a very full itinerary with so much information coming at us in just a week. I took me a few days afterwards to try and sort it all out in my head as the days and the museums continued to get mixed up. Some things that stuck in the head felt like it was yesterday when it had been almost a week before. I think it might take another couple of weeks before it all sits calmly in the mind – what a brilliant 8 days it was. I suppose after waxing lyrical about all the great and positive things I saw in Bulgaria, I should temper my enthusiasm with a wee negative: *it is very hot in July in Bulgaria, and at one point I did suffer from the heat – mainly due I think to the sudden change from the cold summer we were having here at home. So, I think these trips may be better in Spring or Autumn.* There, I have said it. However, if ever there was a chance to return to Bulgaria even hot July would not hinder me in the slightest.

To all the organisers of this trip, and to those who gave the grants to allow me to go on it – I am grateful, thank you. I will end with a short poem I wrote sitting in the shade at the EkoArt Guesthouse.

Bulgaria

This dear green place
can remind so much of home
ideas, hopes and dreams
of a people becoming new again
a flower coming to bloom

Petals of this rose, opening slowly,
reveal the very heart of a nation
ancient
beautiful
essential!

Dr Joe Murray Ph.D
Sunday 2 August 2015
Glasgow, Shotlandiya