

SEASIDE TOURISM: EXTENDING THE SEASON, IMPROVING SERVICES

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Dear Mr. Minister,

Dear Colleagues,

Dear Guests,

Please allow me to thank you for this opportunity to discuss issues associated with the development and promotion of Bulgarian tourism. I am happy that I can share with you, on behalf of the Bulgarian Hotel & Restaurant Association (BHRA) and in person, some thoughts on questions which us professionals in the branch discuss daily and try to answer together in the course of everyday tourist practices.

Before proceeding to the main subject, I would like to make a brief overview of the development of the private hotel industry in Bulgaria. The foundations were laid in autumn 1988, following the publication in the *Official Gazette* on August 18, 1988, of a Council of Ministers' decree permitting private practice in the hotel business. I believe that this has been the most important event in our business. Today, 13 years later, I wonder what the fate of our industry would have been if the then administration had not given us the freedom to develop our business without state intervention. In the 13 years since this act, more than 1,000 hotels have been built in Bulgaria, thousands of jobs have been created, and hundreds of families have been saved from unemployment and economic emigration. In those 13 years Bulgaria has come to rank first in Eastern Europe by number of family hotels. Facilities worth more than US\$ 650 million have been built in that period.

I would like to note that those assets have been accumulated without outside assistance and support. The State was in crisis and could not help us in any way. The banks did not trust us and refused to lend us loans – naturally, losing millions of dollars in potential interest. The European and World Bank were also suspicious, and did not believe that we could succeed without solid loans.

Yet we have proved to everybody that we are descendants of an enterprising nation that may be temporarily in crisis, but that there are people who know how to work and take risks and who, with some help, can do wonders with their entrepreneurship and diligence.

Bulgarians love good quality, and when they undertake to do something they set their heart on it. I and my colleagues, with whom we have been working in the BHRA for more than nine years now, are sure that in a few years Bulgaria will be Europe's latest hit destination. At present, more than 95% of the tourist product is in private hands, and 80% of the privatised hotels have been renovated and redone. Here I would like to mention the resorts and companies that take most of the credit for promoting the image of Bulgarian

tourism. I *must* note the achievements of the Albena resort, the well-known tourist sites run by MG Holding – the renovated winter hotel Rila, the Grand Hotel Varna, Grand Hotel Veliko Turnovo, Arbanassi Palace, etc. We are also proud of the achievements of our colleagues at the Riviera Vacation Club, the Golden Sands resort, and the Union of Owners in the Sunny Beach resort, which is a role model for all of us. Nor could we omit mentioning the successful tourist business in Obzor and Nessebar, which are an attractive role model for the other small seaside towns too.

Yet what real resources do we have to extend the summer season?

The first thing we must do is to improve the culture of services for tourists. Our Association will insist on overall retraining of personnel employed in the sector. In addition, renovation of hotels and restaurants should continue, along with the upgrading of infrastructure and telecommunications.

All this impacts on the improvement of the country's image. Those main things improve the overall business climate, and will help make Bulgaria a more attractive tourist destination.

Next, we must try to find methods of attracting less affluent clients and pensioners with nicer prices off the high season, in May and September.

Yet which are the concrete opportunities for extending the summer season, and which are the leading resorts and units with which the BHRA is working towards this end?

The number of tourist arrivals in Bulgaria has been growing steadily in the past few years. Following the completion of privatisation along the Black Sea coast and thanks to sizeable investments of the major German tour operators – which has resulted in the upgrading of most of the available accommodation – Bulgaria's hotels now offer truly European standards and improved quality of service.

The annual season in Bulgarian seaside tourism is about 120 days long, but the high season lasts just 45 days – from July 15 to August 30.

One of the opportunities for extending the season is to attract a greater number of senior citizens. This type of tourists are well off, they prefer a holiday off season, and special packages have been designed for them.

Another insufficiently used and promoted opportunity for extending the summer season is cultural and special interest tourism, e.g. Bulgarian monasteries with their unique frescoes and icons, some of which are on the UNESCO World Heritage List, the valley of the Thracian kings, etc.

The Northern Bulgarian coast offers excellent opportunities for year-round health tourism. The abundance of mineral springs and curative mud deposits with varied chemical composition, opportunities for thalassotherapy and aromatherapy, combined with a fine climate and a choice of more than 100 kinds of prophylactic and restorative treatment – all this could meet growing demand for health tourism on the global scale. At the thalassotherapy and hydrotherapy centres of the Grand Hotel Varna, the Sunny Day

resort, the Riviera Vacation Club, the Ambassador and Louna hotels in Golden Sands, and Pomorie, tourists can recover from stress. Albena has one of the best known centres, at the Dobroudja Hotel, which offers more than 20 health, relaxation and beauty packages. The fine indoor sports centre and football grass field offer opportunities for winter training camps for sports teams, international tournaments and championships in competitive bridge, ballroom and Latin American dancing, the Albena Rally, etc.

In addition to excellent conditions for a vacation, the hotels have fine business class facilities for conference tourism – conferences, seminars and business meetings – ensuring good occupancy rates out of the summer season.

Less than an hour's drive from the Southern Black Sea coast will take you to the heart of the Strandja, one of Bulgaria's largest and most exotic natural parks, with five nature reserves and 12 protected areas. Visitors to Strandja can see local rituals, places of worship from pagan times, the village of Brushlyan, which is a heritage park, the fire-dance festival in the village of Bulgari, etc.

A more flexible approach to prices and bonuses will make offers for Black Sea holidays more attractive in a longer season.

Please allow me to thank you for your attention and to wish, on the BHRA's behalf, our colleagues and tourist Bulgaria even better chances on the European and world tourist market.