

**BULGARIA – DREAM AREA
ALTERNATIVE TOURISM PANEL**

**January 11, 2002
Moussala I Hall, 14h00**

***Fun Without Borders
Lubomir Popiordanov, Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism***

Dear organisers of this Conference,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Please allow me to thank you, on behalf of the Governing Board of the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT), for the opportunity to present at this high forum our activities and views on Bulgaria as a tourist destination.

At the very peak of the industrial revolution, a little-known ambassador of the British Empire, Mr. Thomas Cook, decided to organise an unusual weekend – and thus made his name as the founder of modern tourism. Only about 30 years later, on a day in August 1895, the Bulgarian writer and lawyer Aleko Konstantinov became the initiator and organiser of another adventure and pilgrimage that is still emblematic of Bulgaria. Along with some 300 people, he walked from the centre of present-day Sofia up to the highest peak on Mt Vitosh, Cherni Vrh.

A Bulgarian intellectual thus became the author of arguably one of the major events in the first decades of tourism as a world phenomenon. And what is more important, this climb had all elements and motives of travel today: return to nature, quest for the natural dimension and valuable experience far from the stressful rhythm of city life, quest for harmony and an environment for better communication. An active model of recreation in which everyone should choose to participate of their own free will, sometimes giving up the conveniences of civilisation in the name of the memorable experience of Adventure in the wild. Sounds familiar, doesn't it?

And then, what about all other examples of tourism whose traces have been preserved in the Bulgarian land to the present day? Weren't ancient merchants and caravans, travelling along the silk and salt roads between Europe and Asia and between the Mediterranean and Scandinavia, involved in tourism in their own way too; or the Crusaders or preachers of the many religious teachings that have crossed this land, the participants in the Olympic Games or the pilgrims travelling to the monasteries in Moldova or Mt Athos, the Sofia Mt Athos, Bachkovo or Rila.

The idea of the divine has been embodied best in nature, in its towering mountain peaks and ocean depths. And even in the darkest centuries of the Middle Ages people wanted to know what was to be found on the peak or on the other side of the mountain. I will stop this list here and take the liberty of congratulating, precisely at this point, the organisers on the motto they have chosen for this forum: Bulgaria – Dream Area.

Today, when Bulgaria is making persistent attempts to shed the shackles of the totalitarian past once and for all, it continues to be a country in which the thrill of adventure is very much alive – a country where you can still dream as in the stories of Eldorado and where you can still start from scratch. A country that still has places where tourists have never set foot and villages in which life goes on as it was centuries ago; where travel can offer a true insight into Europe as it was and will never be again; where the taste of food seems to come from another dimension. A country in which biking, sleighing and skiing along snowbound lanes or off the beaten track, or simply hiking or snowshoeing in winter, are only a pretext for a journey to our inner selves and back in time.

All this proves beyond any doubt how sound the foundations of alternative tourism are in Bulgaria. And this is perhaps only part of the reason why in just four years the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism has succeeded in asserting itself in the Bulgarian public sphere, becoming one of the main movers of development in the Bulgarian travel industry. Today the BAAT has 57 members, which give an unambiguous answer to the question of what is alternative tourism and what is the range of products and services defined as such. The majority of members are family hotels and guest houses, mainly in the Rhodopi Mountains, but there are also larger hotels. Their total capacity is 560 beds. Notably, all have decent occupancy rates. The Association also includes the pioneers in alternative tourism, the Odyssey-Inn Agency and Bulgaria's top three regional tourist associations – Pirin Tourist Forum, the Balkan Range Association and the Union of Rhodopi Hoteliers and Restaurateurs; the administrations of five natural parks, among which I would like to make special mention of the administration of the Vratsa Balkan Range Park; one foundation, the Bulgarian Hotel & Restaurant Association, and more than ten local nongovernmental organisations, municipal administrations and mayoralities, publishers and tourism boards.

Ergo, the question is there alternative tourism in Bulgaria is redundant at least for those almost 60 entities in the sphere of the tourism industry, ecology and biodiversity protection, culture and the civic sector. Our experts estimate that in 2001 the alternative tourist product and services generated almost US\$ 250,000 in the economy of small villages alone, as well villages that are unfamiliar even to Bulgarians. More than 3,200 alternative tourists visited Bulgaria, paying tourist packages in the range of US\$ 1,000 to 1,300, of which close to 50% went in the Bulgarian economy – or at least US 1.5 million aggregate revenues from those tourists alone, if we include their other tours, orders, souvenirs and other used services. Another at least 12,000 tourists used various services – at that, in package tours – in the form of lunch or dinner in a Bulgarian village, a traditional Bulgarian house, Christmas or New Year in a Bulgarian village, trips on horseback or by bicycle, or guided day trips to the mountains.

Those figures are all the more interesting because compared to the different donor programmes and package grants for Bulgaria, they show the country's significant potential and the major role of Bulgarian tour operators and service providers; but

also of the State, which should take care of infrastructure, thus taking a major step forward and enabling Bulgaria to proceed along the path to prosperity with its own resources.

Thus, ALTERNATIVE TO WHAT EXACTLY is alternative tourism:

- ✍✍ Alternative to the matrix, an alternative to mass tourism as a model and philosophy;
- ✍✍ Alternative in regard to service providers – owners of family hotels, guest houses and rooms, chalets, monasteries, mountain guides and horse-keepers, producers of original works of art and crafts;
- ✍✍ Alternative in most cases in terms of location, of areas in which it can and is practised – mainly mountain and rural areas, but also good small hotels with human dimensions and hospitality along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, where the main accent is again on the pristine environment, the original atmosphere of the area and local cuisine, and the absence of the ugly signs of urbanism on the landscape;
- ✍✍ As an alternative to social decline, this type of tourism brings new messages and hopes, as well as new ideas about how to develop sustainable tourism and how to assert sustainable and promising models of local and regional development – needless to say, with a constant priority on the attitude to Nature, Traditions and the Interests of local communities;
- ✍✍ Alternative as customers – individual and package tourists in small and medium-sized groups, usually of 8 to 15 people, groups of people with special interests who arrive perfectly informed and with concrete expectations of what they will experience and discover precisely in Bulgaria, and with a deep respect for the Bulgarian environment and population;
- ✍✍ Alternative to the passive consumer package of services asserted in Bulgaria; many diverse and intelligent messages are addressed to alternative tourists; the packages aim at their development, education and improvement, and presuppose active participation rather than passive use.

In addition, alternative tourism in Bulgaria is a rapidly developing type of tourism based on local enterprise, in which there are opportunities and which generates alternative earnings for all local communities: from potato farmers, tomato paste producers and bakers to the local post office, regular bus services, potters, carpenters, furniture makers and guest housekeepers. All those features also account for the priority attention which alternative tourism deserves in the entire tourist basket and in any present and future plans on sustainable regional development adjusted to local resources. A full 12 years since the start of changes, in many Bulgarian villages alternative tourism is synonymous with hope and creates new informal circles, awakening the once proverbial enterprising spirit of the Bulgarians.

It is both difficult and hardly necessary to go into greater detail at such a forum. Still, it is worth listing – so that we can get used to them – those products and services in Bulgaria which can be classified as alternative tourism by the above-mentioned indicators and criteria.

Here they are by group:

Adventure: ski mountaineering, cross-country skiing,

Trekking, hiking, soft walking, speleology, off-boarding, snowshoeing;

Cycling and mountain biking and horseback riding;

Multi-activity;

White water rafting, kayaking, sea kayaking and canoeing, snorkeling;

Bear watching, bird watching, botany, geology, gemmology;

Archaeology and underwater archeology, Bulgarian National Revival architecture, monastery tours and sacred places, pilgrimage;

Them?: embroidery, textiles, pottery, woodcarving (training courses can also be considered as a separate product)

Rural, gourmet, wine tourism.

The end and limits of this list depend on our personal imagination only. The more important thing is that it confirms the motto chosen by the organisers of this first representative international conference: Bulgaria – Dream Area. As good hosts and true mediators, they have provided a major opportunity for all institutions, entrepreneurs and representatives of the Third, i.e. NGO, Sector, who are committed to the Bulgarian tourist industry, TO MEET. And, I would add, TO AGREE TO BE TOGETHER and TO START LEARNING HOW TO COMMUNICATE AND WORK TOGETHER. I would invite everybody to applaud Governor Bob Miller, Mr. Maxim Behar and Mr. Thomas Tait as a sign of our acknowledgement. I would very much like to believe that with this Conference we are paving the way to building a new image of Bulgarian tourism, to elaborating a new, consensual strategy on development that will be approved by the entire guild.

In this connection, I support most of the views expounded in the presentation on government policies in tourism, made by the esteemed Mr. Dimitar Hadjinikolov, Deputy Minister. In tourism, as in all of Bulgarian public life, the deficit of quality in communication is taking its daily toll in the form of lost positions, contracts and years, and non-development. If there have been any undoubtedly positive developments in Bulgaria in the past 12 years, they are exclusively in the sphere of tourism. Significant progress has been made despite the markedly aggressive legal and institutional environment. The credit for those achievements against all odds goes to private enterprise, especially to thousands of small and medium-sized entrepreneurs mainly in the hotel industry. Despite the cumbersome state machine, paperwork, red tape and lack of transparency and dialogue in relations. Precisely those results allow us to talk readily of “dreams” today. Yet wouldn’t it be even better if in five years’ time we could also talk of “Bulgaria – a dream destination”?

The UN General Assembly has declared 2002 World Year of Mountains and World Ecotourism Year. It is more than symptomatic that this Conference is taking place at the very beginning of the year. For us at the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism, 2002 will be a continuation of our efforts in the sphere of PR with the Bulgarian press, training of owners of guest houses and rooms, family hoteliers and mountain guides together with the Mountains and People Association. A prestigious project will give the go-ahead to a network called "Charter of the Bulgarian Home," offering accommodation in mountain and rural areas. Special efforts will also be devoted to the assertion of new national destinations – the Northwestern Balkan Range, the Rhodopi Mountains – and of comparatively new, original, products such as Routes of the Rhodopi Master Craftsmen and Wine Routes. I also have the pleasure of announcing that a collection of ten posters of Bulgarian mountains is due to be released by the beginning of February.

I will end with Bulgaria's greatest resource: the Environment. Let us hope that this year the Environment will at last become a national priority written in capital letters. In 1872, the US Congress passed the world's first ever law declaring an area a national park. Yosemite National Park in the Rocky Mountains has remained a role model of an area with species of world importance, trees that are over 100 m tall and more than 2,000 years old. Its boundaries have remained unchanged for 130 years now! The Bulgarian public is expecting the State and its institutions to finally do their job and keep the social contract that binds them to take care of Bulgaria's green wealth, environment and mountains.

I have always loved Bulgaria. I believe in Bulgaria's exceptional potential to become a dream destination, with People in Bulgaria living in dignity and prospering through employment in tourism. I believe in Bulgaria's Path and believe that Alternative Tourism is part of it. Dear organisers, colleagues and guests, please allow me to end my presentation with this and to thank you for the honour of being among you and for your attention.

Thank you.

For all who are interested in the subject, there are enough copies in English of the SWOT analysis of Bulgarian alternative tourism, as well as a summary of the activities of the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism. They are also available on the BAAT website published by the organisers of this Conference.

Thank you.