

FT REPORT - HOUSE & HOME: 'It's easy to socialise with Bulgarians'

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Born in England, Vesey Crichton, 58, studied and taught transcendental meditation in the 1970s and 1980s, when he was based mainly in Switzerland. For the next 15 years, he was in the information technology industry and instrumental in setting up the internet search engine Altavista, building operations across Europe, Australasia, India and South America. Now he works with Cleves, a Bulgaria-based property investment fund.

I first came to Bulgaria in 2004 with a couple of business partners, scouting around for a new venture. We noticed that when countries join the European Union, property values rise fast. When we first came, it was far from certain that Bulgaria would meet the criteria for EU accession, but we liked Sofia and felt the opportunity was strong. The big property stories of the day in Bulgaria were the Black Sea coast and ski resorts such as Bansko and Borovets. We were not convinced. But we did notice that it was hard for westerners to find nice places to rent in the capital. So we set out to build a portfolio of upmarket furnished flats with great service.

I did not speak Bulgarian, but fortunately English goes a long way here. Almost everyone we work with speaks good English, which is lucky because I find Bulgarian seriously difficult. It's a Slavic language and uses the Cyrillic alphabet. Having studied Greek at school helps a little when you need to decipher street signs - in Sofia, the street signs are never in Latin script - but after three years here my vocabulary is still almost non-existent.

An expat would face a variety of challenges in Bulgaria. As capital cities go, Sofia is fairly small - 1.5m people - but getting around town can be tedious because of the traffic. The streets just aren't designed for the volume of vehicles. Work-wise, communism has left a mark: people are less used to making decisions or following things through - though this is changing gradually. Also, there are some local idiosyncrasies. For instance, Bulgarians don't really "do" e-mail. If you want to progress something, you'd best pick up the phone.

Communism fell 18 years ago and now Bulgaria is a full member of NATO [The North Atlantic Treaty Organisation] and the European Union. Gross domestic product is growing fast. Inward investment is strong. Tourism is increasing. Things are on the up. Yet Bulgaria is still the poorest state in the EU. Will the gap close? How long will it take to catch up?

Bulgarians are friendly to foreign settlers and it's easy to socialise with local people. It takes a short while to acclimatise. Initially Bulgarians can seem taciturn but quickly that gruff exterior melts. There's a twinkle, then real warmth and enduring friendship. People here are great - so warm and welcoming.

Back in the UK, friends ask which parts of Bulgarian life I enjoy most.

A Bulgarian friend summarises his country's charms with three letters: WWW - which he says stand for wine, women and weather. For me, it is less specific. This is a very pleasant place to live. There is lots to do. The city feels very safe. Society is surprisingly gentle and civilised. There is a quiet sense of national pride. Bulgarians have a deep affection for their culture and history. Most of all, for the majority of people there is a genuine excitement about the future. Sofia has quite a buzz.

Life in England is pretty established and predictable. Here in Bulgaria, it's all change. For 500 years this was a satellite of Turkey; for nearly 50 years, a satellite of Russia. Now, almost for the first time for centuries, Bulgarians are free to chart their own course. So there is a lot of pride and a palpable sense of excitement. It's great to be a part of that.

There are about 15,000 expatriates in Sofia and the foreign community is growing. For Cleves' portfolio, this is the target market, but for ourselves, we spend much more social time with Bulgarian friends. As for the foreigners, we've found that a large number of people from western Europe have bought houses in the countryside as second, or even first homes. The same has happened on the coast and in the mountains.

Then there are also pure property investors. Over the past few years the British and Irish led the charge, often drawn by low prices in holiday areas. Nowadays it's the Russians - but their focus is quite different: they favour upmarket apartments in Sofia.

Ironically, for somebody who works with a portfolio of lovely flats, I still live in hotels. Our apartments rent so quickly that it's easier to keep them ready. If I invest in a Bulgarian second home myself, it will probably be in my favourite area in outer Sofia, called Boyana, on the lower slopes of Vitosha mountain, which dominates the south of the city. Not just for the fabulous views but also for the excellent restaurants, the village-like atmosphere and the history. In the centre is Boyana church, which dates from the 10th century and has beautiful medieval frescoes.

I eat out a lot. Sofia boasts a fine selection of swish, upmarket restaurants but also lots of simple places with terrific food. Friends who work in Bucharest, Romania, say they are jealous. Surprisingly, this is a great country for a vegetarian like me. Traditional Bulgarian cooking includes lots of non-meat, non-fish offerings and the vegetables are tastier than in most western countries.

One restaurant, called Manastirska Magernitsa, has the longest menu I've seen anywhere in the world - it's the size of a small book. My current favourite restaurant is Chepishev in Boyana.

Sofia is one of the highest-altitude capital cities in Europe, so seasonal changes here are marked. In summer it can get very hot - I've been here when it's been 44°C. In winter temperatures can drop to -20°C - though the past couple of years have been quite mild. There cannot be many capital cities in the world where you can be skiing 50 minutes after leaving the town centre. There is great skiing all around - not just on Vitosha but also an hour away at Borovets and two hours away at Bansko.

I enjoy Sofia but am embarrassed to have explored so little beyond it. So far I have travelled mainly in some of the mountains. My most memorable experiences were in the Rila mountains, which have glorious walks and some famous old monasteries.

My sister-in-law recently wrote the section on Bulgaria for Frommer's *Eastern Europe* and has mapped out a 10-day trip of her favourite places for my wife and I.

What I miss here is a river. Unusually for a capital city, Sofia has no large river flowing through it. Since home in the UK is in Twickenham [south-west London], I do miss walks along the Thames and the glories of Marble Hill and Richmond Park.

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