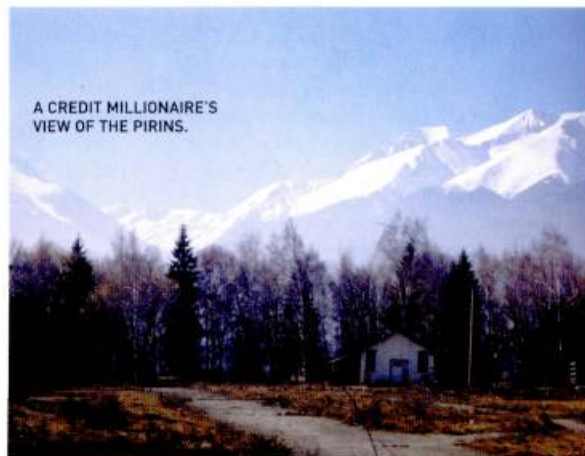




MARTIN HESSE DIVES INTO A BIG BOWL OF GOAT YOGURT.



THE DAILY SPECIAL AT THE EAGLE'S NEST: MISERY.



A CREDIT MILLIONAIRE'S VIEW OF THE PIRINS.



SCENES FROM A SURREALISTIC SANCTUARY

The black sea diaries, chapter 2:

skiing in bulgaria? insane vertical, steep trees, mad goats and cheese so sour your eyes water? millions spent on high-alpine enterprise at bansko? a rabid local freeride contingent that hosts successful big-mountain comps? who knew? apparently, everyone.

story and photos by leslie anthony

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he gypsies danced into the night.

By a river, on the edge of town, silhouetted against a towering bonfire like kindergarten cutouts, their mari-onette figures circled the flames, swooping flutes, pounding drums, and weaving an ancient rhythm whose metronome rivaled the house techno leaking through porous brick from a local club.

Fueled by a bricolage scavenged from a backdrop of disintegrating buildings, the leap-

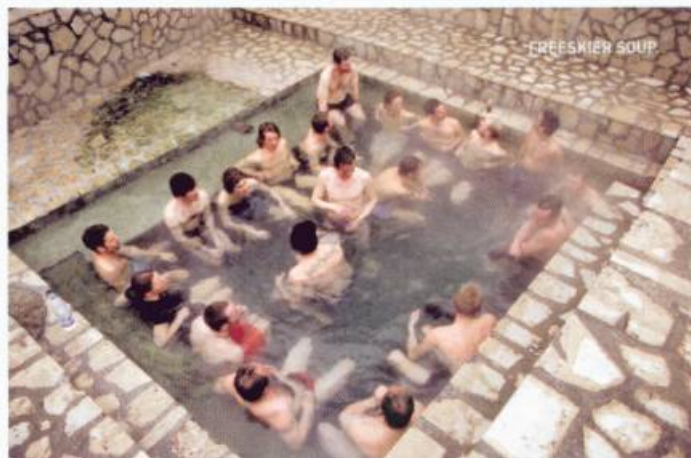
ing, enthusiastic tongues could have licked stars from the sky; instead they managed only to extinguish an occasional snowflake tumbling from the still, obdurate clouds.

We stood apart from the dancers, separated by a concrete ditch into which, like some snake in a shoebox, a river's meandering ambition had long ago been forced. It was an unconquerable divide we hadn't expected as we'd stumbled over rubble-constellated ground toward the fire. A physical barrier emblematic of the deep cultural chasm across which we now gazed—or at

least the fact that we were too drunk to try and cross it.

From our wavering vantage, we peered back through centuries.

It had started out as a typical exotic ski mission: word had it some crazed riders held a respectable annual big-mountain contest in Bulgaria's unheralded but impressive mountains; a Whistler posse was heading over to do battle, and following them would make a unique story for those of us in the business of unique stories. That everybody and his dog already knew about it—such that





BOOZE AD, OR TGR AD? WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?
SKIER: MARC-ANDRÉ BELLIVEAU.

writer Sam Moulton and photographer Paul Morrison, withering in the cold to my right and working on a story for *Skiing*, were but the tip of a significant North American iceberg docked in the town of Bansko—would become clear only later.

This current vignette, however, was merely the eve of Lent, with the gypsies enjoying a final toxic binge before the 40-day purge. They swigged homemade *rakia*—a grappa-like liquor of local record—from soda bottles passed in hands otherwise occupied with music dating to the Ottoman Empire. It seemed we'd been there hours when the last empty bottle was tossed onto the pyre. As if on cue, the wind picked up and snow bore down across the Pirin Mountains. And still the gypsies played, notes spiraling on Vesuvian sparks, drifting over the garbage-strewn ditch, settling onto frozen ground, and rushing toward us like cold air under a doorjamb.

Our Bulgarian hosts watched impassively, Moulton scribbled in his notebook, Morrison squeezed off one last shot, and I pushed my

The magic trees were a perfect forest fusion of precipitous and spacious. We followed under the canopy, amazed at living-room legroom, and on high alert for goats.

ungloved hands into a backpack to fight the growing chill. What I found there was warmth of a different stripe—a half-finished bottle of *rakia*.

Eyebrows arched. It was going to be another very long night.

They called them Magic Trees, and they were—an unimaginably perfect forest fusion of precipitous and spacious. Think powder skiing 1,000 metres of 40-degree slopes under perfectly spaced Douglas fir with no undergrowth and you have the *bauplan* for this chunk of Bansko Resort, an eternity of forest between the main peak, Todorka, and the groomed rollers of a ski area that recently transformed itself from a funkified, Sovietski backwater for local sport aficionados into an ultra-modern destination resort with an access gondola, high-speed quads, and computerized snowmaking.

This mantle of huge, aged trees was, in fact, one of the last old-growth forests in Eastern Europe and one of the big reasons the area was also a national park. Another was the wild goats.

Our first run had been through sun crust and sastrugi, then a few centimetres of new over a rat's nest of ground-hugging Macedonian pine. Next lap found us in a fantastic multi-entrance bowl, but still battling changeable conditions and crust. That was when the Bulgarian Extreme and Freestyle Skiing Association—represented by Krasi Petrov, brother Ilian, and Ivo Altanov—showed us the

Magic Trees.

—Watch for goats, said Ivo. They're like spirits in the forest.

—Will they run away or stay put? I asked, recalling that BEFSA's big-mountain contest was titled the Mad Goat Ride, and posters featured a crazed-looking ungulate.

—I don't know, said Krasi, pushing off.

We followed under the canopy, amazed at living-room legroom, slightly perturbed by icy, rattling conditions, and on high alert for marauding goats. We saw none, though it's likely they saw us crashing through crust and tumbling under the protective evergreen. Following an easy cat-track back to the resort made it clear that on powder days, goats be damned, there was no better place to spin laps.

On the plateau where we loaded the chair stood four otherworldly ice sculptures that rose like 20-metre stalactites to end in sharp, disemboweling spikes. A de facto warning to aspiring communist despots, they were so bizarre as to somehow oddly belong. Their shadows moved across the snow like sundials.

—What are those all about? I asked Krasi on the ride up.

—I don't know.

—So they're just there all the time?

—No. They are from vodka promotion.

Sculpture.

—You do know. Are they abstract, representational, impressionistic?

—I don't know.

—Is there something we should know about Bulgarian vodka?

—I don't know.

—Can you drink the tap water? I ask, taking a more practical tack.

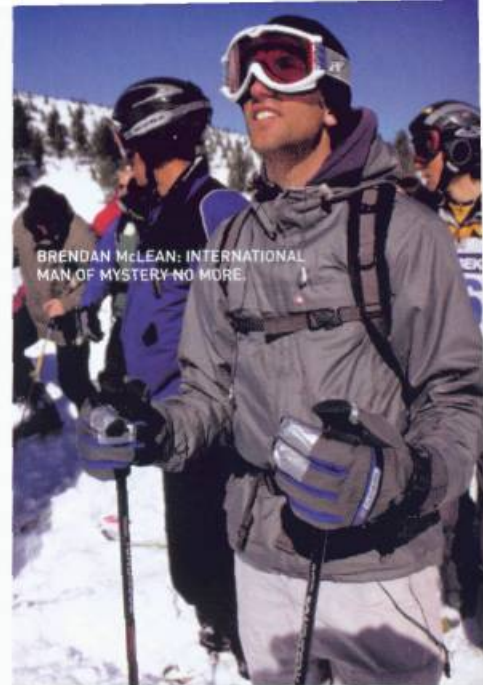
—Yes. It is very good. Although maybe not so much in Bansko. You might have stomach disorder. I am developing disorder my last time here. It is very bad. So, no, do not drink tap water.

—Is there anything *else* we should know?

—I don't know.

We first became entwined with the brothers Petrov at the airport in Sofia, where a smiling Krasi piled Moulton, Morrison, myself, and a mountain of baggage into the smallest vehicle imaginable. After parking the car in a "secure" place (brother Ilian's suburban garage) and commandeering another vehicle, we'd ventured into the city to kill time until we could meet up with Ivo (BEFSA's vice president) for the drive to Bansko. The afternoon in Sofia offered a discount lesson in East European history.

Bulgarian communism sailed into the sunset during a bloodless 1989 coup, leaving the all-too-familiar hourglass stratification of post-communist society to take hold—the ultra-rich who capitalized on the hidden economy of communism after privatization; a tiny middle class that, theoretically, with time and economic care, grow; and the legions of working poor who'd never really been uplifted and were now caught out by sudden,



BRENDAN McLEAN: INTERNATIONAL MAN OF MYSTERY NO MORE

Цени за България

WELCOME TO BULGARIA! NOW YOU CAN

Category	Adults	Children
5-day card	35 \$	20 \$
7-day card	45 \$	28 \$
9-day card	160 \$	90 \$
9-day card	270 \$	170 \$
9-day card	400 \$	260 \$
15-day card	580 \$	340 \$
Guests (1st ticket / 2nd - 3rd)	16 \$	8 \$

Prices of ski-cards and tickets for Foreigners



JEN ASHTON FINISHES ANOTHER FOUR-STAR DISQUALIFICATION RUN.



WE THINK THIS IS BRENDAN McLEAN, AND HE THINKS HE'S SKIING.

titanic changes.

Mafia—Bulgarian, Russian, Georgian-controlled large aspects of the economy, using bombings and assassinations as a macabre PR to keep the populace in fear (much like governments, actually).

Although the country itself was over 1,300 years old, Sofia offered little indication of cultural hubris; the communists had made sure of that. And anything that survived their homogenization was quickly whitewashed by the new capitalist influx. Squat, columnar buildings and Soviet-nik statues mixed with the inevitable hallmarks of American cultural imperialism—KFC, McDonald's and Dunkin'

ronically—or unfortunately, depending on how much *rakia* you'd had the night before—you could also hear "Gorky Park" playing for real.

In fact, every morning at breakfast it looped through on the same Euro-rock soundtrack. After several days of this, Moulton and I were breaking out the concert lighters and swaying... until they switched to house mix played so loud that the thumping base caused more wincing than the inevitable slab of sour cheese centred on a plate between two greasy eggs.

For his part, Krasi remained amused at our daily performance but unwilling to partic-

tures-old trade route used by all manner of peoples, including the Ottomans, who controlled the area for 500 years; despite this, there were enclaves, especially here in the Pirins, that always resisted their rule. They were Bulgaria's first skiers.

The Pirins—an east-west range that received weather from both south and north—rose here to 3,000 metres and showed off their pyramidal geometry. Steep, consistent fall lines were everywhere—the pistes of Sun Valley, alpine of Whistler, backcountry of the Rockies, and the powder and trees-spacing of Japan.

Above rose Todorka Peak, 500 stark alpine metres of couloirs, cliff bands, sloping shelves and hanging snowfields. It was bisected by several fracture lines, indicative of the sketchy avie conditions and snowpack; in fact, two weeks prior to our arrival the entire western face had gone to ground on a two-metre crown.

Which is why the BEFSA crew felt it perfectly safe to climb up above the top lift and lead us across some serious exposure on that very same avalanched face. It was now rock-solid, edge-resistant linoleum and funneled hundreds of metres down heinous chutes to a hanging valley. Moulton would later start his story in *Skiing* with a tale of being abandoned here by the BEFSA crew who skipped across the scoured gutters like it was a walk in Gorky Park. He was only half right: we'd all pretty much been left to shit ourselves on the first crossing.

But after traversing the chutes, we had found decent, buttery turns in the first couloir we came to. That wasn't good enough for Krasi, who insisted on dropping a five-metre cliff on twice-repaired Pocket Rockets held together with crazy glue.

—Will your skis hold?

one writer thought Bansko was most like Jackson Hole circa 1978—steep, deep, and no one around to ride it. except on his first night there someone had tried to sell him an AK-47.

Donuts. The suburbs were an oozing, architectural wound of painfully decrepit post-Stalinist apartments scabbed over by a hopeful patina of unfinished construction.

On the roads, a scourge of barely operating vehicles that offered a much-appreciated counterpoint of primary colour to the duotone brown and grey landscape was gradually being reseeded with the black, navy, and gunmetal of high-end Audis, Mercedes, and BMWs—the darker, smoked-window fleet of instant wealth.

Yes, the winds of change were blowing so hard you could practically hear the Scorpions' post-communist anthem, "Gorky Park," playing in your head.

ipate. He was too busy instructing us in Zen and the Art of Yogurt. There was thick yogurt, thin yogurt, sour yogurt, sweet yogurt, yogurt in a glass, sheep yogurt (very special) and, I suspected, wild goat yogurt traded under the table by BEFSA operatives.

—What do you think of this song?

—I don't know.

—Do you like this music?

—No.

—Ah. What kind of music do you like?

—I don't know.

We were on the chairlift again.

Bansko, 1,000 metres below, lodged to one side of a broad valley, was centred on a cen-

—I don't know.

—What if they don't?

—My brother will glue them back together
Sibling rivalry dictated that older brother Ilian then had to drop a 10-metre cliff onto hardpack. Which at least explained the source of Krasi's shattered secondhand slats.

It was long after sunset when we'd arrived at the home of Ivo, who moonlighted as a marketing specialist when not skiing or attending to BEFSA biz. As we were writers and Ivo a subject, it was determined Moulton and I would ride with him.

—So, how are you? I asked as we pulled away.

—I am already crazy.

—How's the contest looking?

—We are still negotiating.

I took this to mean shitty, though I'd yet to realize that, here, negotiating was less an issue than custom.

We drove south in the dark toward Greece, as invading Macedonian armies once did. There were few lights and the blackness revealed little—a smattering of taverns, a farm, billboards in the Cyrillic alphabet, valley, plateau, forest, and finally, a mountain pass. Cresting it, the lights of Bansko hovered like a space station below a void of stars.

Our hotel was a bizarre complex of interconnected stonework cottages located safely outside town. Owned, we were told, by a "credit millionaire" (read: loan shark) on the brink of bankruptcy. In the smoke-filled lobby, worried-looking people crowded both sides of the desk, waving cigarettes, pointing fingers and shouting. This was conversation. The BEFSA brain trust seemed unperturbed that months of careful preparations were suddenly hostage to the whims of an intransigent desk clerk with heroin-hollow looks and a death-row disposition.

—Hotel room? I asked.

—We are negotiating, said Ivo.

—Lift tickets?

—We will negotiate.

—But this was all arranged.

—Yes, but... situation change.

We'd sampled many of the traditional Bulgarian taverns known as *mehanas*, with their costumed waiters and meat-boat menus, but found ourselves gravitating most often to the Eagle's Nest, a local skier hangout snubbed by most Bulgarians as too ghetto; rheumy-eyed, leather-vested waiters and overflowing Asian-squat toilets didn't engender much pity, but the food was fast, plentiful, in some cases good, and *rakia* as cheap as it got.

One night Moulton, Morrison and I had occupied a long central table with some Mad Goat contestants and a smattering of BEFSA brass. In a corner booth sat *Powder's* Dave Reddick, Porter Fox and several members of a TGR crew. As if it weren't enough that we all found ourselves in this strange Black Sea outpost at precisely the same time, on the bar's lone TV, live from Sofia, Kina Pickett, Wendy Fisher and Hannah Hardaway were explaining to Bulgaria's most popular talk-show host—a bald, manic cross between Letterman and Conan—how they came here to do a Warren Miller segment and got completely skunked.



IF YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT, THEN
WHAT ARE YOU WHEN YOU DON'T
KNOW WHAT YOU'RE EATING?



KINDA LIKE SKIING AT
JACKSON HOLE IN 1978,
ONLY NOT AT ALL.



THIS COULD BE ANYWHERE, BUT IT ISN'T.



NO, HE'S NOT
WITH TGR.



KRASI, RHYMES WITH
CRAZY, AS IN GLUE.



THE GYPSIES DANCED INTO THE DAY, AS WELL.

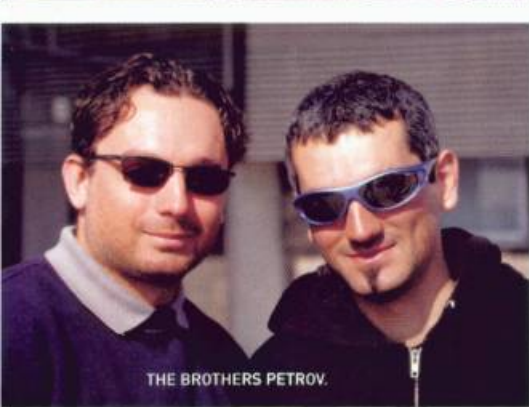


"DIDN'T YOU HEAR? POWDER, SKIING, TGR, AND WARREN MILLER ARE ALL HERE!"

"WHAT, VALDEZ IS CLOSED?"



WITH THE INFUX, ARE THEY SPINNING IN THEIR GRAVES?



THE BROTHERS PETROV.



JEN ASHTON GAVE UP POWDER FOR LENT.

It was too weird to pay attention.

Clusters and feeding frenzies are common in the ski world (think Whistler and the heli-ghettos of Alaska and B.C.) but seldom do they happen *before* a place has been vetted at least once in the mainstream snow-sports media. In the end, the BEFSA story belongs to the Internet. The guys had been e-mailing with the European ski world for years, generating interest in their area. Their website was linked to other key sites, and that, more than anything, was what drew the crowds. How the timing of this particular cluster came to be so exact is anyone's guess. Only Fox really knew anything about the place. He'd visited on a whim in 2003, hitting good powder and catching the resort in predevelopment glory.

—I'm calling Jackson Hole 1978—steep, deep and hardly anyone around to ride it, he'd told me.

—Jackson Hole... really?

—Well, not entirely. My first night there someone tried to sell me an AK-47.

BEFSA had 50 to 100 members depending on whom you talked to. So maybe it made sense that they referred to similarly named individuals by number. As in Emo numbers 1, 2 and 3. I knew whom Emo number 1 was—a chain-smoking veterinary doctor with a clipboard—but the others had me confused.

—Who is Emo number 2? I posited to no one in particular.

—The drunk guy driving the bus, stated Jen Ashton, like everyone knew.

We agreed it was more convenient—or at least less socialist—to be identified by function: So there was Organizing Emo, Drinking-and-Driving Emo, and Phantom Emo—the latter a perpetually referenced individual who could neither be found nor accurately described.

As it turned out, Ashton was the only true world-class talent in attendance, though that wasn't the reason she'd come. I'm just here to have fun, she'd told Momchi Panayotov, BEFSA's travel manager, logistical expert and official translator.

But due to avalanches, weather, and the resort being a pain in the ass, the fun factor had rapidly spiraled south as comp days were canceled and BEFSA was forced to play venue roulette. When the site was finally staked out—about a half-hour walk from the lifts—Ashton and I had spent an hour scouting lines; it was a short, windswept bowl with small ledges, medium-sized drops, a few chutes and pockets of barely concealed Macedonian pine longing to grab at any passing ankle. It appeared to be goat free.

In the contest, Ashton started strongly down a technical section. After a series of short drops she came to the end of the rock section and turned left off a two-metre cliff, dropping easily to a small basin and sticking the landing. Accelerating here, however, she broke through crust and pitched forward, losing a ski. She put it back on and continued, all in less than 30 seconds, then skied hard and fast down the rest of the course, grabbing Japan off the last rock.

Under IFSA rules, it would have been a strong run, and given the weak women's field, Ashton should still have made the podium. Instead, she was disqualified, a fate she accepted with typical largesse but which quickly mor-

phed to controversy when it was recalled that Momchi had stated flatly at the athletes' meeting and to the judges that lost equipment would *not* be cause for disqualification.

Organizing Emo and Momchi expressed apologies for the DQ and decided it had been handed out unfairly due to a misunderstanding. Ashton's original score was resubmitted so that she could at least record the IFSA points.

—Can you actually re-score someone after the comp is over?

—Of course... situation change.

Fox thought they were bowling. Or at least that's what he'd write in *Powder* months later. We, of course, recognized immediately that despite any veneer to the contrary, the *Powder/TGR* crew was simply and famously drunk and obnoxious.

There was Micah Black, dressed as a post-modern Frankenstein **heli-pilot** with green face and headset microphone, swooping across lanes to show people scenes from *The Big Lebowski* on a portable DVD player. There was also a headless man (Jamie Pierre?!), Dracula (natch), two Amish brothers, and an assortment of bizarre, unidentifiable characters; it was all very strange and intimidating to the Bulgarians. Especially when we told them these were our friends.

It was also f**king weird and getting weirder; There was Black trying to diffuse a potentially explosive situation with a group of Welsh who wanted to rumble... Steve Jones stumbling drunk in cape and wig, screaming for drugs and throwing a bowling ball through the air and into a lane from halfway to the pins... bottles of *rakia* falling from people's coats.

As we shared the last of a bottle, one of the Amish brothers leaned in.

—What is this place?

—Bulgaria.

—Ummmm. Oh, God—the helicopter; I've never been so wigged out.

—Sketchy?

—So bad. The pilot wouldn't even put the collective down 'cause he was too scared to land. Straight off the farm. Skis. Shoelaces. I can't...

—Have a drink.

—What is this place?

The Halloween party adjoined to a dance club where they asked you to check your guns at the door. We headed back to the hotel to find the gates locked. I hopped the fence with reckless abandon, intent on opening the gate from the inside, only to find myself in the arms of a large greaseball in a tracksuit with a cold-steel dick. Our bankrupt "credit millionaire" was staying at his hotel, no doubt pursued by his own creditors and in need of 24/7 protection. Only the sound of my drunken English had kept me from having my head blown off as I came over the wall.

On the mountains, at least, it was snowing again.

In the end, the Mad Goat Ride was a true multinational enterprise, with 60-plus entrants from 10 countries competing. But it was unlikely heroics from 23-year-old Brendan McLean of Fernie, B.C., that took the prize. A mechanical engineering stu-

dent at the University of Calgary on a year-long work term in Zurich, McLean had once run with a local crew of Ryan Oakden, Ian McIntosh and Daryl Treadway at home on Fernie, but spent most of his ski time here in Verbier.

He'd posted a great run in the early going and maintained control of the lead throughout. Airing in off the top onto ice, he'd skittered across hard stuff until he reached powder. On the edge, he'd quickly gotten it together and made a creative hit off of a wind lip; after that he displayed full focus. His next hit started off a roller that led to a seven-metre cliff, which he took with speed, landing in control in powder that showed no signs of the hard stuff that had driven other competitors' knees into their teeth. From there he'd simply mached it to the finish. Point Canada.

He got a pat on the back and a belly full of *rakia* from the international contingent—most of whom would distinguish themselves next day by invading a decrepit former hot-springs resort *en mssse* and chasing local farmers from their daily leisurely soak—and a cheque that just covered the cost of his trip.

At the party, smoke was thicker than usual, and that was saying something; it started slowly but picked up as shots appeared on the bar. By 1 a.m. the brothers Petrov were in full swing, having liberated themselves from all clothing save boardshorts, doffing their shoes in favour of ski boots. They wore blinking Petzl lights on their heads and ran into people after sliding sideways at them on their boots; the headlamps made them look like trains coming at you across the dance floor. Krasi, a non-drinker, seemed particularly out of control, though he could only have been high on sugar after consuming an uncharacteristic two orange sodas.

—I am crazy guy, he said by way of explanation, forehead strobing absurdly. This being a journalistic enterprise, I sought a second opinion.

—This *is* crazy guy, said a woman who'd once worked with him at the Sofia Hilton.

—OK, wild and crazy guy, I joked, hoping he'd never seen the infamous *Saturday Night Live* skit. So you're as mad as a hatter.

—No. Mad as a goat.