

Mad Goat

Disease

An epidemic is ravaging the Bulgarian hill country—it's called big mountain freeskiing.



By Sam Moulton

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PAUL MORRISON

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Krasi Petrov drops into one of the many 2,000-foot-long, unnamed couloirs off Bansko's West Ridge.

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VO HAS DISAPPEARED. So has Venci, his petite girlfriend. Ilian's gone too, as is his younger brother, Krasi. In fact, all the members of the Bulgarian Extreme and Freestyle Skiing Association have ditched me.

Except Matei. Thankfully, Matei has stopped for a smoke several yards above. Last week, the slope we just traversed, a western ridge off Todorka Peak's lower flank, avalanched to the valley floor, some 3,000 feet below, just a sheen of snow remains between bands of rock. I'll admit it: I'm scared. My legs begin to shake, which in turn makes my floppy tele boards quiver a bit.

Just before he vanished, Ivo (pronounced E-vo) had shouted some details over his shoulder about the terrain. All I made out through the wind and his staccato bursts of English was something about an "ice cliff," that a few couloirs might have "really nice, protected powder," and that others would be "not good at all." I try to pull more route information out of Matei, but he just smiles widely and shakes his head no. Matei's English is not as polished as Ivo's. "Anywhere is good," he finally proclaims. Then he puts out his cigarette and gestures for me to go first.

This is my first run in Bulgaria, a country that no one outside of the Eastern bloc seems to know much about. A country where half the population looks back fondly on the cheaper, safer, Communist times, and the other half can't wait to join the EU. A country where mafiosi lob grenades at one another through the windows of brand-new Volkswagen Touaregs. A country

that, by virtue of some strange disturbance in the global force or magical alignment of the cosmos, has become the latest international hot spot in the big mountain freeskiing movement.

NESTLED UP AGAINST the 9,000-foot Pirin Mountains, with the Rila range to the north and the Rhodopes Mountains to the east, the town and ski area of Bansko lie in a heavily forested valley of southwestern Bulgaria, 40 miles north of the Greek border and 370 miles west of Istanbul. Despite all the raw materials—bricks, tiles, two-by-fours, stones, scrap wood—that are piled about haphazardly, it's a cozy town. Narrow cobblestone streets meander between stone houses, and the downtown is packed with family-run hotels, B&Bs, and *mehanas*, traditional Bulgarian taverns. Hazy smoke permeates the air, and most people are

open, in 1984. A poorly funded national ski team was cobbled together, and as many as 40 percent of Bulgarians—by some decidedly unscientific estimates—learned to stem-christie on retired rental gear from Austria (when they weren't working for meager wages or waiting in line for shampoo, that is). Then the Iron Curtain fell, and Bulgaria—one of the Soviet Union's staunchest allies—pretty much imploded.

In the 15 years since their embrace of free-market capitalism, Bulgarians have endured near-constant political and social turmoil, food shortages, and rampant corruption. At one point in the '90s, the situation was so bad that some Bulgarians resorted to digging up streets to pull copper from telephone wires. Things have been looking up lately, but this past spring, when the EU admitted 10 new countries—most from the former Eastern bloc—Bulgaria wasn't one



ABOVE: Ivo Altanov, BEFSA's marketing director. **RIGHT:** 60-foot spires, off which U.S. freeskiers were launching, loom above Bansko's "Alberto Tomba" trail.

doing something with wood: chopping it, stacking it, hauling it in donkey-drawn carts, burning it, or standing near piles of it, looking glum.

During the Cold War, the government built three major ski resorts. Bansko, the crown jewel, was the last to

of them. And a month before I arrived, a bomb exploded 100 miles north of Bansko in downtown Sofia—Bulgaria's chaotic yet cosmopolitan capital—killing four gang members.

But the Bulgarians have skied through it all, and in 1998 Ivo and a few friends



Similar clothing, different brother: Ilian Petrov airs it out.

who attended Bulgaria's top English-speaking high school with him, founded BEFSA. They held Bulgaria's first-ever big mountain competition and started organizing hut trips and avalanche-instruction courses.

Today, BEFSA is 70-strong, with a growing reputation for hosting rowdy, well-run big mountain contests. I'm here for this year's event, dubbed the Mad Goat Ride. By the time I arrive, all 60 spots are filled, and no fewer than 34 foreign skiers from 9 countries have registered. But it isn't the competition I'm interested in. Months before I arrived, Ivo had smiled me a note saying that "most foreign skiers who skied and partied with us seem to 'nobly' envy our way of life." I had no idea what he was talking about, but I was sure as hell intrigued by the notion of Bulgarian freeskiing.

MO ALTANOV, 28, is BEFSA's marketing director. He's tall and lanky, with an impressive English vocabulary. Like

most BEFSA members, he lives and works in Sofia and skis Bansko as many weekends as he can afford to. Then there's Venci, Ivo's 27-year-old girlfriend, who looks like a gymnast, which she isn't, and skis like a slalom racer, which she was. Krasimir, 26, is a stocky fellow with thick, black curly hair, who's hoping to get a visa to work on a U.S.-based cruise ship. His older brother, Ilian, 31, a slimmer, slighter, and more sleepy-eyed version of Krasimir, is BEFSA's Web designer. Matei, age 33, is one of the group's oldest members. He's got a belly and a grapefruit-size bald spot. His graying hair is pulled back into a tiny ponytail.

"Our organization is very open-minded," Ivo tells me on the drive down to Bansko. "We don't care if you ski or snowboard. We all ride together, and it does not matter." Yeah, yeah, that's cool, but what's with the catchy name of your competition, I ask. "It's very common to see wild goats in our mountains," Ivo explains to me, rather seriously. "And I

think there is a strange symbiosis—is that the right word?" (I nod that it is)—"between BEFSA and the goats. We both like to roam free in the mountains. Oh, and we're both pretty tough." Then he reaches over, smacks me on the shoulder, and laughs.

ON THE MORNING OF my second day, I meet Krasi at the hotel's restaurant and eat breakfast to the Scorpions' *Wind of Change*. The kitchen is cranking the German band's ballad at near-concert levels. ("I follow the Moskva...down to Gorky Park...listening to the wind of change.") You know the song, the one about *glasnost* and *perestroika* that's always played over images of cigarette-smoking Deutschlanders in acid-washed jeans, sledgehammering the Berlin Wall.

Because Krasi has a dust-colored, propane-gas-powered Opel hatchback and no job, Ivo has asked him to look after me during the days leading up to the competition. So while the Scorpions

wail, I inhale greasy eggs and assault Krasi with questions. Is the harvesting of all that wood in town legal? "No." What does everyone do with it? "Heat their homes." How come so many Bulgarian women dye their hair bright red? "I don't know." Krasi's not much of a morning person.

Then it's off to the mountain. Instead of razing or renovating the several blocks of dilapidated buildings that line the road to the resort, someone tried to hide them. But rather than build a fence, they simply strung 10-foot-tall, virtually transparent white banners in between the road and the buildings. What's up with that, Krasi? "That's just the way it is here," he says with a shrug.

The rest of the resort, however, just underwent a two-year, \$35-million face-lift, and now boasts a sleek and modern base lodge with flat-screen TVs and a shiny rental fleet. Three new Poma lifts were installed last year, and a Doppelmayr gondola now connects resort to town. Across from the base lodge, amid the rubble, are several brand-new, generically upscale condo and hotel developments. A freshly painted sign, written in English and Bulgarian, lists lift-ticket prices: 24 leva (\$15) for locals, and twice that for "foreigners."

The BEFSA members we hook up with to "free-ski" (they love this term and use it several times a run) are loath to ski in-bounds. When forced to, they apologize profusely, then get it over with as quickly as possible. I chase them as they weave wildly on their Pocket Rockets among less extreme countrymen.

Like we did yesterday, Krasi and I find a few BEFSA members hanging around the base of Todorka Peak, the

top-hat-shaped, 900-vertical-foot rock that sits atop the resort. Bisected by several 45-degree couloirs, it's everybody's favorite place to ride. But conditions are still sketchy, and the few BEFSA members who have skied it today advise us against doing the same. "You fall somewhere near the top," Ivo tells me later, "and it would be hard for me to put you back together at the bottom."

IN THE MORNING, I MEET Krasi at the hotel's restaurant and eat breakfast to (what else?) *Wind of Change*. ("An August summer night...Soldiers passing by...Listening to the wind of change.") We freeski all day, and afterward meet everybody at the Eagle's Nest, a downtown restaurant with cigarette-singed tablecloths and murky landscape paintings on the walls. The place is packed, filled with smoke, and, quite obviously, unheated. It's not particularly clean,

water drink), and a huge plate of grilled pork or chicken—your typical Bulgarian meal—cost eight leva, or about five dollars. Everything gets washed down with rakia, the national brandy that looks like water but tastes like fire. You can buy rakia everywhere, but BEFSA members distill the stuff at home. One hundred grams, roughly three and a half shots, cost 30 stotinki, or 18 cents. (Later, going through my notebook, I find barely decipherable scribbles that read, "36 cents = Loaded.")

Several glasses of rakia into one such night at Eagle's Nest, Ivo elbows me. "Your friend Wendy, over there, she's on the TV." I look up, and there's Wendy Fisher, sitting next to fellow professional U.S. skiers Kina Pickett and Hannah Hardaway. They're in town to shoot a segment for this year's Warren Miller film, *Impact*, and,



ABOVE: We're not sure what an "ethno party" is, either. RIGHT: BEFSA members and foreign competitors take over the Eagle's Nest.

either. At one point, a 16-ounce hunk of grilled meat skids off a plate en route to our table and hits the carpet with a beefy *thunk*. The waiter puts it back on the plate and shrugs.

The Eagle's Nest is BEFSA's unofficial headquarters. A few Kamenitza beers, a salad, an airian (a yogurt-

apparently, they're guests on *Slavi's Show*. It's a David Letterman rip-off, only with scantily clad dancing girls.

I leave the Nest with Andi, Krasi, and Ilian, to meet the Jackson Hole, Wyoming-based Teton Gravity Research film crew (I told you Bulgaria's hot), who are also in town shooting their new



"Goats? I don't see any stinkin' goats."
Judges at the bottom of the Mad Goat Ride.

film, *Soul Purpose*. Andi has been their ski guide for the past few days, and we're supposed to meet them at the resort's brand-new, four-lane bowling alley.

Everyone's pie-eyed. And, unless rakia is a hallucinogen, they're also all in full costume—hillbillies, a headless horseman, and someone who looks like Don King on crystal meth. When a fired-up Australian TGR guy somehow offends a Welsh bowler one lane over, American freeskiier Micah Black, who's six-four and dressed as Frankenstein's monster (black cape, green face, some sort of antennae taped to his head), and is stumbling around showing everyone *The Big Lebowski* on his portable DVD player, somehow ends up defusing the situation, which had quickly grown to involve track-suited Bulgarians who looked like Slavic Sopranos.

Which is to say, the nightlife in Bulgaria leans toward the surreal: A few nights later, Ivo and Venci take me to meet some non-BEFSA friends of theirs

at a Macedonian tavern in Dobrinishte. Though it's almost midnight, the stone-walled pub is crammed with Bulgarians of all ages. Fireplaces are at full roar. In a far corner, a woman with long black hair belts out folk music with the help of a synthesizer. Serbian, Bulgarian, and Gypsy tunes reverberate. Then the microphoned lady launches into a Macedonian fight song, and the place erupts. Patrons spring out of their seats, dancing hand in hand. Others reach up to ring the herder's bells that hang head-height from the ceiling.

"I love this music," Ivo shouts in my ear. "A month ago, I broke a bone in my hand right here,"—he pauses to show me the butt of his left hand—"pounding on the table, listening to this song."

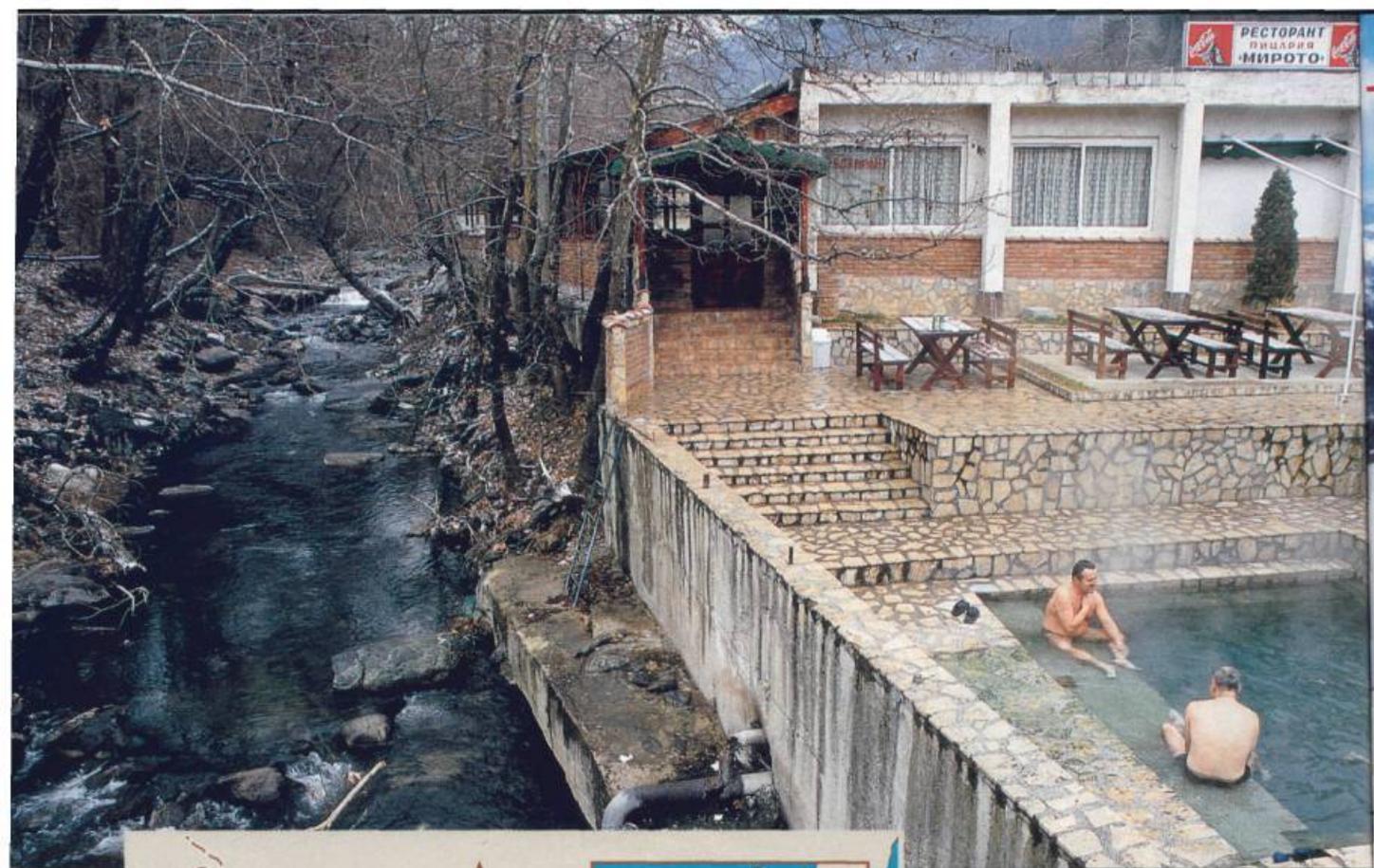
THE FUTURES in the air...I can feel it everywhere...blowing with the wind of change." (Seriously: Scorpions. Three days in a row.) By the time I stumbled off to bed at 2 A.M. the night before, Krasi—who stopped drinking cold

turkey several months ago—and his brother had donned their ski boots, rolled their pants up to their knees, and were dancing together to European remixes of American techno music.

The plan for today is to ski off the back side of Todorka and hunt down fresh snow the next valley over. But fog rolls in, so we buy a bottle of rakia and head to some hot springs in the village of Ognianovo.

During the Communist era, the sprawling compound of bungalows, apartment buildings, and concrete-and-stone pools that make up the hot springs had been part of a private retreat for Party officials and their families. It must have been quite lavish to soak in the pools, while the rest of the country waited in line for protein, but now the place is the epitome of grim Eastern bloc conformity and its subsequent decay. Windows are cracked, dumpsters overflow, and the place seems built to dull the spirit.

The springs, however, are hot and



ABOVE: Soaking in the hot springs in the nearby village of Ognianovo is a BEFSA tradition.

crystal-clear. We simmer in the pool between dips in the icy creek that runs by the complex. Just before we have to go, I head down to the creek for one last shock to the system. Garbage floats in the eddies.

As my legs go numb I think about Ivo's earlier email calling non-Bulgarians "nobly envious." At the time, that word choice had struck me as a bit odd, but now it's starting to make sense. Sure,

they ski and party hard, but every vagabond freeskiier I've met does that. Bulgarian freeskiiers, on the other hand, ski and party while living a hundred miles away from the resort and holding down respectable day jobs. In some cases, BEFSA members are supporting their extended families. It's a hardscrabble lifestyle, but a desirable one, too. There are no spoiled Bulgarian freeskiiers. And because of

that, skiing is valued.

On the day of the competition, Krasi and I had gotten separated before meeting up in the lot. "Bad news," he let loose with a nervous sort of laugh. He'd cracked one of his beloved Pocket Rockets cranking a few hard turns on a groomer. Turns out the skis are hand-me-downs from Ilian, who had painstakingly repaired the same ski in a different spot last year.

Will your brother be able to repair these, I asked, half-jokingly. "Of course he can," Krasi told me, a bit offended by the question. "My brother is like a surgeon. He will open the ski up very carefully, just like last time, repair it with epoxy, Kevlar, fiberglass, the same stuff, and then close it back up, also very carefully. Then they will be super-skis."

Several months later, when I caught up with Krasi over email, he reported that the repaired skis were in "perfect conditions." I wasn't the least bit surprised. •