

Piste of the action

Nicky Holford hits the slopes in Bansko, the Bulgarian resort offering top-class skiing on a budget



Checking in for my first ski trip to Bulgaria several years ago, my fellow travellers, mostly dressed in city clothes, looked so unlike skiers that I asked if I was in the correct queue.

Few of them had ever skied, and when I asked a couple for their reason for going to a Bulgarian ski resort, they replied that the beer was cheap and they might as well give skiing a whirl.

This time, it couldn't have been more different. Nearly everyone on the flight to Sofia sported a technical ski jacket and many were checking in skis. Good-value holidays to Bulgaria are still around, but the choice of facilities and level of accommodation is now competitive with many European ski resorts – at a fraction of the price.

AFFORDABLE LUXURY

This is particularly true of Bulgaria's newest resort, Bansko, located in Pirin National Park, where state-of-the-art ski lifts, modern mountain restaurants and top hotels make it an attractive alternative to more expensive European resorts.

Among them is the award-winning,

five-star Kempinski Hotel Grand Arena, where I stayed. Set right on the ski slopes, its extensive spa with pools and Jacuzzis, restaurants and attentive staff allow you to feel like a millionaire without needing to actually be one.

On our first night, it was hard to decide between the Mediterranean Come Prima restaurant or the bistro menu, but we opted for the sushi bar and Teppanyaki Grill. Food is taken so seriously here that before the March 2020 lockdown, the Kempinski had a culinary event where they invited five legendary chefs with a total of nine Michelin stars between them. Wine is of equal importance. Bulgarian wines, notably reds, have a long history, many of the vineyards having been planted during the communist era.

HITTING THE SLOPES

Early the next morning, we took the 10-minute gondola to the main ski area at Banderishka Polyana.

This is the main ski hub, with a dedicated beginners' area. A new lift system, including two six-seater chairlifts, offers access to 46 miles ➤

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DESTINATIONS

SKI & SNOW | BULGARIA

ASK THE
expert

CHRIS RAND

sales and marketing
manager, Balkan Holidays

"Sales for ski holidays in the coming winter season are very good, as skiers and boarders who missed out last year look forward to the season ahead. We're also getting a lot of first-time skiers, as demand has built up over the past two years.

"In terms of destination, Bulgaria's low prices make it a popular ski spot and Bansko is especially in demand due to its excellent ski infrastructure and quality hotels.

"Highlight cancellation policies to reassure clients. If we have to cancel holidays due to Covid, we give a full refund. In the resorts there will be social distancing and caps on the numbers of skiers in gondolas, which will be cleaned every day.

"For agents still daunted by selling ski, we have launched a simple guide to booking winter sports holidays on our website."



BOOK IT

Balkan Holidays offers a week's B&B at the Kempinski Hotel Grand Arena from £767 per person, including transfers and flights from Gatwick in January 2022 (flights are also available from nine other UK airports). A six-day lift pass with skis, boot rental and tuition costs from £202. balkanholidays.co.uk



BELOW: Rila, Bulgaria **CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** ski and spa facilities at Kempinski Grand Arena Bansko; (inset) pubs and restaurants in Bansko **PICTURES:** Evgeni Dinev; Georgi Daskalov; Daniel Yordanov/gdstyles.com



of skiing, including several long, intermediate runs. The longest run from the highest point of the resort (at 2,600 metres) to the base is around 10 miles. There are some expert slopes and off-piste opportunities, but the skiing and snowboarding mostly suits beginners and intermediates. Extensive snow-making ensures there's enough snow cover from December to mid-April. All this has been made possible by a multimillion-euro investment by the company Ulen.

As well as being the scene of some lively lunchtime entertainment, Banderishka is also the finish line for World Cup races. The Tomba run, named after Alberto Tomba – Italy's heart-throb downhill racer – has put Bansko on the map as one of the host resorts for the FIS World Cup circuit. Skiing legends including Tomba and Lindsey Vonn, US Olympic medallist and World Cup winner, are official Bansko ambassadors and have both been given apartments here.

At an easy walking distance from the ski area is Bansko's attractive old town, a Unesco World Heritage Site with narrow, cobbled stone streets and beautiful architecture, much of which dates back to the Renaissance. Here you will find local *mehanas* (traditional restaurants) serving several courses of Bulgarian specialties such as *banitsa* – filo pastry stuffed with cheese – plus meat dishes and salads. There are some lively après-ski bars as well as quieter local spots with the occasional accordion player.

BOROVETS AND BEYOND

But it's not only Bansko drawing the crowds. The more traditional Bulgarian resorts have also upped their game – not least in Borovets, Bulgaria's oldest ski resort, set in the scenic Rila mountains and offering excellent value for money.

The large, renovated and family-friendly Hotel Rila, set right on the slopes, is practical and well-priced, with friendly communal areas, several restaurants and a fitness centre. The spa has designated areas for children along with a large swimming pool, steam bath, sauna, cryo cabin and Turkish baths, while activities including dog-sledding and night skiing are also on offer.

Borovets is also Bulgaria's largest terrain for cross-country skiing, which beginners can try at the Bistritsa Sport Center.

Off the slopes, it's well worth discovering some of Bulgaria's historic sites. They include the Unesco-listed Rila Monastery, founded in the 10th century when Bulgaria was under Ottoman rule and home to murals, frescoes and a magnificent gold room filled with ancient treasures.

Back in Bansko, in the lobby of the Kempinski hotel – where a large painted mannequin studded with hundreds of Swarovski crystals was being installed – it was time to try the spa. A massage with Bulgarian rose oil seemed like the perfect way to relieve aching muscles after several days spent skiing these underrated slopes. **TW**