



POWDER!

*Bulgaria's Bansko resort lifts the
Iron Curtain on skiing in the East*

СТРОИКА!

by Porter Fox





КРЕМИКОВЦИ

35

години



Black on white. PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR



"How 'bout a rubber band?" PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR

I THINK WE'RE BOWLING. That's the impression I get from the four maple lanes shimmering under fluorescent lights, the large red and green balls rolling down them, and the pins occasionally bouncing off each other and into the air. I think that's what this is, and I'm pretty sure we're doing it at the base of Bulgaria's Bansko All Seasons Resort—Eastern Europe's newest mega ski area, and a place I'd thought someone might go to get away from bowling. Yet here we are. Throwing the rock. With a group of skiers dressed as monsters. Which is weird.

Not that monsters, or bowling for that matter, are foreign to this part of the world. Dracula used to impale his foes a few hundred miles north in Romania's Transylvanian Alps. Frankenstein's castle is an overnight train ride to the northwest near Mainz, Germany. Titans and Cyclopes roamed the coastlands of Greece and Turkey to the south. The bowling is easier to rationalize—it's brightly colored, not very cool, and American, which pretty much guarantees it a special place in Eastern European culture. Like Hall and Oates. But still, I'm not sure it belongs *here*, in this quaint 10th century farming-turned-ski town set at the foot of the Balkan Mountains.

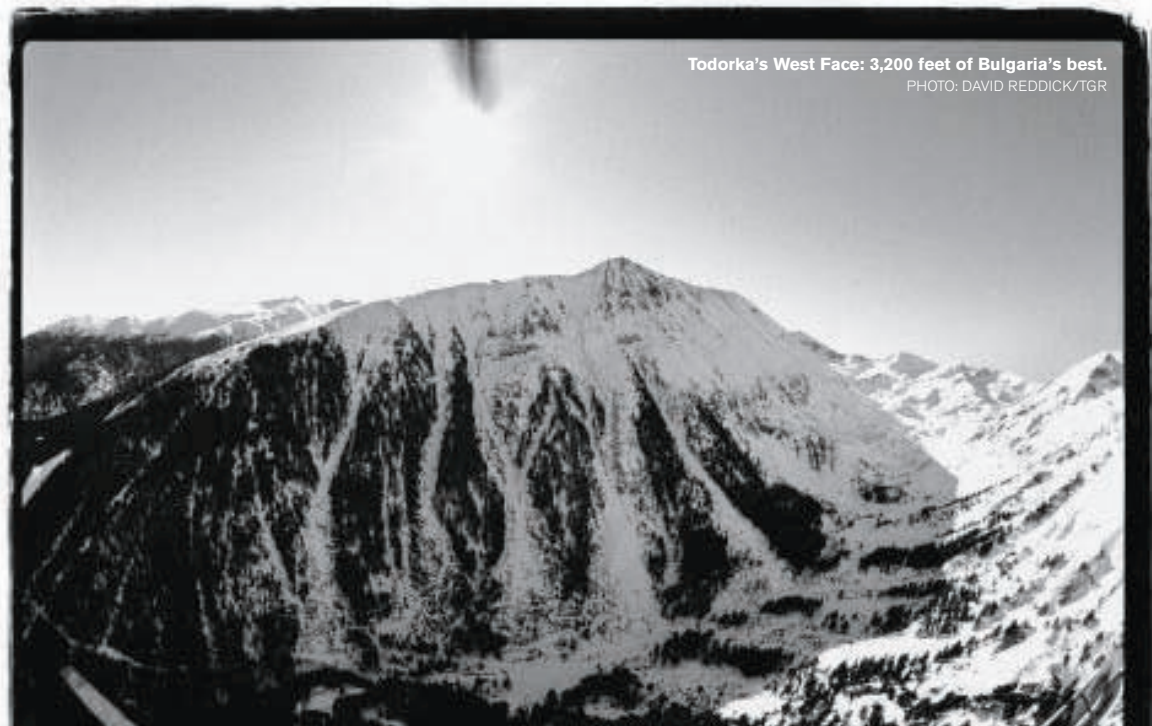
From the look on his dark, Slavic face I can see our Bulgarian guide, Andy Balevski, doesn't think so either. He's skied Bansko most of his life and repre-

sents all things extreme in the southeasternmost corner of Europe. He co-owns a ski school here in the winter and a wind-surfing school on the Black Sea in the summer with his girlfriend, Maia. He's logged countless first descents in the Pirin Mountains—a sub-range of the Central Balkans surrounding Bansko. At 26, he's the president of the Bulgarian Extreme and Freestyle Skiing Association (BEFSA), a ski club 60 members strong that hosts an annual extreme competition here.

Andy looks to me for help in understanding the scene. He smiles self-consciously. The Headless Horseman watches from the shadows. Frankenstein is standing at the bar. It's not the costumes that have him buffaloed; it's the idea of major American ski media being here at all, in his hometown resort. The monsters

are here to film a new ski movie. Photographer Dave Reddick and I came to cover Bansko's rumored powder slopes in print. Just last year, Bansko existed as a backwater, ex-communist recreation facility operating with one Chernenko-era triple chair and a handful of half-soused lifties. Only a year ago, Andy and his posse of locals skied waist-deep powder all day, never crossing a track—not just in the days after a storm, but *ever*. People never bowled in Bansko before now. Last season, this hotel didn't even exist.

Andy takes Maia's hand and stands to leave. "This is crazy," he says. He's not upset. His and BEFSA's efforts helped get us here. But he's right. This *is* crazy. All the incredible changes Bansko has gone through in 19 months. The literal overnight transformation from sleepy Eastern Bloc powder haven to up-and-coming international destination. And all these Americans—yes, there are others—here to expose Europe's next secret stash. It's almost too much to comprehend. Especially with the monsters, and the crashing balls, and this doppelgänger of Frankenstein who is now lurching toward our seat with a tray of 12 White Russians.




Todorika's West Face: 3,200 feet of Bulgaria's best. PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR

"HE'S TYING SHOELACE KNOTS," Dave says.

"Square knots?" I ask. "Or bowlines?" "Shoelace knots."

I look closer. He's right. It's 8 a.m. and the sun is rising over the Pirins. We've been waiting all week to secure helicopter time after a warm spell across Europe ruined inbound skiing. Now we're standing behind Bansko's sparkling new gondola base station, watching our pilot tie



our skis with twine—in lieu of a cargo basket—to the skids of a brand new Bell helicopter. In fact, his grounds crewman, who until this point had wandered aimlessly around the landing zone in reflective pants, looking at the door handles like they held the mystery to vertical flight, is holding his finger on the knot.

"There are updrafts," Micah Black says to the pilot, appropriately named Ivan. Ivan watches Micah's hands as he waves them in the air, trying to simulate the flying bits of metal and flesh that would result from a pair of dislodged skis hitting the rotor. Ivan nods, twists his bushy white mustache in his fingers, and returns to the bows. After 30 years as a military birdman, he's excited to fly today, too. He told us earlier that he's been waiting all winter to "practice landing on snow."

Thankfully, after a collective lifetime of heli skiing the Chugach, the Teton Gravity Research (TGR) film crew we are traveling with takes over ground operations and gets us on our way. A roll of duct tape is produced. Then nylon straps arrive on the scene and the troops load up. With skis firmly taped, tied, and buckled in place—imagine a driving scene from National Lampoon's *Vacation*—Micah and the first crew take off for the mountains. Twenty minutes later, we follow suit in a second load. As the chopper skims a succession of gondola towers leading up the mountain, the terrain Andy described to us comes to life.

Todorka Peak rises 8,200 feet out of the Pirin Mountains like a pyramid and is the home to Bansko resort. Though not quite as big, topographically the mountain smacks of Whistler or Verbier—with anywhere from 1,000 to 3,000 vertical feet of skiable terrain over steep, granite-lined faces. Thanks to storms blowing off

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Backward in Bulgaria: Marc-André Belliveau bringing new moves to the old country. PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR



Even out of costume Jamie Pierre is capable of monstrous deeds. PHOTOS: DAVID REDDICK/TGR



the Mediterranean to the south and Russia to the northeast, an annual eight- to 13-foot snowpack—the most in Bulgaria—transforms the mountain's rugged flanks into an amusement park of natural features. Thick stands of old-growth Bosnian and Macedonian pines shelter snow across ridges and draws. Granite outcroppings along the top quarter of the mountain hold a half-dozen couloirs and rime-covered spines.

The resort's 11 intermediate and beginner runs are classic

curve toward the valley floor. Because Bansko's boundaries have never closed in almost 20 years of existence, the West Face has basically become a massive backcountry run about the size of Aspen. To complete the picture, two 30-room lodges sit in the middle and head of the valley. They're minimal but also cheap and open for business year-round.

The chopper rises out of Banderitsa Valley and a network of snowy ridgelines unfolds to the east. I spot a person standing on one of them. I look at Ivan and

"I FEEL THE LIGHT FLUFF CUSHIONING MY BOARDS AND REMEMBER HOW ANDY TOLD ME THAT BIG STORMS HERE CARRY FINE BITS OF SAND FROM THE SAHARA."

European, stretching a football field across and wending like fairways down the northeast face. The inbounds trails are steep and dynamic enough to spur a bid for a

future FIS race (Alberto Tomba is the official ambassador of Bansko) but Bansko's true *coup de gras* lies beyond its boundaries.

The West Face of Todorka, beyond the western boundary of Bansko, boasts the kind of ski terrain developers build resorts around. The mile-long ridge that extends southwest from the summit holds more couloirs than you could count on an afternoon tour. Small chutes feed from the upper ridge into larger couloirs that run from 2,000 to 3,200 vertical feet into Banderitsa Valley. Because you have to traverse to access them, however, skiers only get to test the bottom two-thirds of any of the runs. One-hundred-foot pines, spaced bus-lengths apart, populate ridgelines that dive in a steep

check my seat belt. His face is contorted. It twitches. I look closer and see his eyes are closed. The skis wiggle on the skid, a lone bow wagging in the wind. A gust hits us and Ivan opens his eyes and looks down. The figure is waving frantically at us.

WHITE RUSSIANS ARE REGARDED in Bulgaria's bowling alleys—and history—with a mix of apprehension and appreciation. When the Russian-backed Fatherland Front marched into the capital city of Sofia in 1945 and claimed Bulgaria as a communist state, Bulgarians followed their leaders begrudgingly. Fifty years later, they had much to thank their Russian comrades for.

Under Todor Zhivkov's 27-year reign, Bulgaria embraced the socialist manifestoes of Marx and Lenin. It sided with Russia in its stand against the capitalist West and erected monuments to its Russian leaders in the streets of Sofia. When the Fatherland issued a call for



Frankenstein in the house. Micah Black, below a friendly fatherland likeness.
PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR



increased youth recreation in the 1980s, Bulgaria responded in kind.

Skiing had long been a pastime at Bulgaria's three resorts, and soon there was talk of building another. A third of Bulgaria is made up of mountains, so there were plenty of proposed sites. One sat 100 miles south of Sofia near a 10th century farming village, surrounded by some of the most beautiful peaks in the Balkans. The town lies near an ancient Thracian settlement and had been a stop on the overland Mediterranean trading route for centuries. One of Zhivkov's generals went to investigate. He liked what he found and approached the local party chief about cutting several runs for a resort. The chief said no. The general left. Some months later when the chief was away on vacation, the general returned with a company of troops and cut the runs anyway. By the time the chief returned, there was nothing to do but clear the deadfall and string a lift. Such was the impolitic inception of Bansko.

The resort became the locals' choice over the next decade. Its bevy of steep

lines on the hill and lack of them at the lift were preferable to more developed resorts like Borovets and Pamporovo. Plus, Bansko's well-preserved Bulgarian culture—from Middle Eastern-esque folk music to plum brandy to a dozen variations on the shish kebab—made it one of the few towns in Bulgaria to have survived the homogenizing cultural effects of communism. Andy and his posse of friends were more than happy to abide by Moscow's edict. They traveled from Sofia on weekends to stay at a 13-story student dorm built on the side of Todorka and show their commitment to the party—all night long with Russian vodka, and all day long on powder slopes the Russians helped cut.

Then *perestroika* swept through Europe in 1989 and vast, corrupt privatization mixed with shortsighted economic policy left Bulgarians broke. Where skiing was once socialized and tickets sold for pocket change, Bansko had to start charging for lift passes. By the late 1990s, Bulgaria had become the poorest country in Europe—with an average annual income

of \$1,510—and Bansko's slopes were nearly empty.

Where bankruptcy grows, banks make hay and in 2000, Bulgaria's First Investment Bank initiated plans that would change Bansko forever. The bank retained Austrian consultants to show them how to build a European-style resort—including hotels with bowling lanes—and then waited two years for the permits. Environmentalists blocked the development, citing that cutting old-growth trees violated international environmental law. In the fall of 2002, the bank prevailed over the greens and workers broke ground. The bank was so eager to complete the development, they dug the footings for the new lifts during the winter. By the following fall, they'd erected two new Doppelmayr quad chairlifts, three on-mountain restaurants, a state-of-the-art snowmaking system, a new base area, a gondola running to town, four new trails, and 10 new hotels in town. To say the development was one of the most immodest and immediate in the history of European skiing would be an

understatement. In 2003, Bansko stood as the single largest monetary investment in Bulgaria.

THE HELICOPTER DROPS TOWARD the ridge. I see that the man waving is Micah. After more than a decade heli skiing in Alaska, he's familiar with every aspect of mountain flight, except how to land the ship. Considering the way Ivan is bringing us in, we're thinking of giving him a shot at that, too. Micah has stamped out a 20-by-20-foot landing zone in the snow. He throws a handful of fluff in the air to show Ivan what direction the wind is blowing. He takes a knee and, after Ivan's second successful snow landing of the day, leads us to the edge of the cirque.

Countless couloirs and bowls extend above the Demianitca Valley, accessed by a half-dozen ridges and twice as many 4,000- to 9,000-foot peaks. The ridge we're standing on is about three miles southeast of Bansko and opens into 10 short but perfect granite-lined couloirs.



Bulgaria. PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR

The area holds such prime terrain, it's mind-boggling to us that much of it has never been tracked. The peaks across the valley seem to hold a similar quiver of possibilities, but besides Andy and his crew, and a handful of adventurous alpinists, the backcountry around Bansko is largely unexplored. While the film crew shoots skiers launching off natural hits along the ridge, I find a shadowed line and make my first run of the day. The snow isn't perfect. The warm spell left a thick crust. But there are six inches of fluff on top, and the wind has blown much of it along the ridgeline.

Powder billows around my shins as I drop down the lee. The slope is moderate, about 35 degrees, and I feel the pull of the mountain for the first time in days. The sun is bright and the air perfectly still. A river meanders under the snow along the valley floor below. I feel the light fluff cushioning my boards and remember how Andy told me that big storms here carry fine bits of sand from the Sahara. I notice three tiny skiers skinning alongside the river and consider how the new

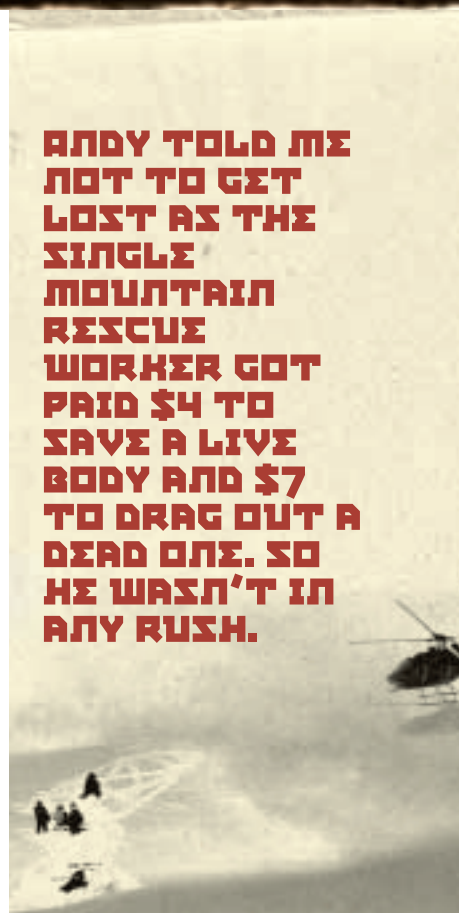
lifts and hotels will change Bansko. I remember Andy's stories about storms that dropped a foot a night for a week, how it was only he and maybe 50 other skiers there to enjoy it. I think about the tales because they represent a time and place where skiing prevailed over development and comfort, but also because I had seen it for myself.

This isn't my first trip to Bansko. I was here two years ago, before the development—following rumors of an enormous mountain hidden deep in Eastern Europe. The resort I found was a throwback to Telluride in the 1960s or Snowbird in the '70s—it was massive, cheap, and there was hardly anyone there. I'd always regretted missing the golden years of America's big Western resorts, but at Bansko it seemed I was living them. You had to watch the triple running to the top of Todorka closely because some of the chairs didn't have seats. Tickets were \$7 a day. There were literally no people. The lifts started the chair when we reached the bottom of the slope and stopped it when we got off at

the top. I skied 3,000-foot powder runs with Andy and his friends for 10 days straight and never crossed a track. Andy told me not to get lost as the single mountain rescue worker got paid \$4 to save a live body and \$7 to drag out a dead one. So he wasn't in any rush.

One day on that trip, the BEFSA travel director, Momchil Panayotov, told me to follow him through the Banderitsa Valley up into the trees. His father was a professor in the Department of Forestry at the University of Sofia. Momchil pointed to an old, gnarled pine with massive, twisted trunks. "Thirteen-hundred years old," he says. The development was already underway and when we skied down the valley, as if on cue, the sound of chainsaws echoed off the granite cliffs. We stopped to chat with a crew of woodcutters hired from the town. They were gristled, middle-aged men with bushy eyebrows and massive, sap-blackened hands. Their feet were covered in bubble wrap to keep them warm, and they seemed alright with the plans for Bansko, as long as they got paid. We skied away

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"ANDY AND HIS FRIENDS TRAVELED TO BALSKO FROM SOFIA ON WESSKELDS TO STAY AT AN 11-STORY STUDENT DORM BUILT ON THE SIDE OF TOBORNA AND SHOW THEIR COMMITMENT TO THE PARTY—ALL NIGHT LONG WITH RUSSIAN VODKA, AND ALL DAY ON POWDER SLOPES THE RUSSIANS HELPED TO BUILD."



Spinal tap. Skier: Marc-André Belliveau.
PHOTO AND SEQUENCE: CHRIS FIGENSHAU/TGR





over fallen pine boughs and sawdust, trees and stumps lying around like avalanche debris. A twin-rotor Russian helicopter flew overhead, carrying a tower for one of the new quads and I wondered if Andy and Momchil had any idea what was coming.

This is how change goes. The days of \$7 lift tickets and inexhaustible powder are coming to a close. By 2004, the price of a ticket had jumped to \$28 and skier visits had more than doubled. And

east and west of Todorka, a complete heli-skiing operation, new alpine and nordic trails, and up to 60 new hotels.

There's momentum here, unstoppable momentum you might say, to build

for Swiss-style hotels. Roads will be widened and there's even talk of an airport someday.

All this is coming, and Andy knows it. Not that it's all bad. The resort could give a much-needed economic shot in the arm to Bansko, and Bulgaria. All the new facilities will make accessing Bansko's hidden caches easier. Andy understands this. He's starting to know what to expect. He's even opened a guiding business with his girlfriend and plans to expand it next year. He looks around at the crowd now. He's happy to be here, happy to host us, but he's going home. Things will keep changing—this is inevitable. But one thing won't. There will always be skiing in the morning.

WHITE RUSSIANS SEEM TO BE THE only thing keeping the monsters at bay. Frankenstein is holding two of them. Dracula is sipping one contentedly through a straw. The Headless Horseman is feeding his to the head under his arm.

Andy is leaving. The BEFSA big-mountain competition starts tomorrow and he has to get up early. He surveys the lanes. The scene in the bowling alley, and town, this week couldn't depict the changes in Bansko better. Skier Jen Ashton is sitting in lane two with a half-dozen writers, skiers, and photographers from North America. We passed skiers Kina Pickett, Wendy Fisher, and Hannah Hardaway yesterday morning walking to the gondola. Earlier tonight, the trio were guests on Bulgaria's equivalent to *The Tonight Show*, talking about how to survive an avalanche. In sum, no less than 20 representatives of three of the biggest ski magazines and two of the largest ski-movie makers in North America populated the cobbled streets of Bansko this week.



PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR

the development isn't near over. Bansko doesn't have any interest in remaining a replica of Telluride in the 1960s. It has its eye on the Whistlers and Vails of today. Plans for the next five years include a half-dozen new lifts on mountains to the

Bansko out to its maximum capacity. Which, with hardly any government regulation, or at least little regard for it, seems limitless. Trees will be cut, though as few as possible the bank says. Farmers will be evicted from their houses to make way

IT'S AFTERNOON NOW. THE HANGOVER from Bansko's local plum brandy has worn off and the lifts have closed. Everyone's gone. The TGR crew is heading to Romania, costumes in tow, at nightfall. The word is it snowed there seven feet in seven days.

Andy wants to take us on one last run. He flags down a snowcat and David and I load onto the back. The ride is jarring, metal tracks whirring alongside the flatbed we're standing on in ski boots. There's no footing and a couple of times I almost fall onto the treads. There's something disturbing about how comfortable we've become around danger on this trip.

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Skier: Jamie Pierre. PHOTO: DAVID REDDICK/TGR

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The cat drops us off on top of Todorka and we walk to the edge of the West Face. The sun is blood red and the farmland below, stretching toward Sofia, looks like a patchwork quilt. The cat disappears down the trail and the Banderitsa Valley is silent. We follow Andy and click into our skis.

We slip in and out of the old pines on the way down. Heavy winds the night before blew a foot of snow onto the ridge. This is Andy's secret stash—a line probably 100 people have ever skied besides him and his friends. He makes long, powerful turns down a steep rib that leads into a ravine. Snow whorls off his tails. David and I stay on the ridge awhile longer and emerge into a snowfield. It's getting dark. I look down at the Banderitsa Hut and see the little trail leading up away from the river, away from the ski tracks, and into the woods. I see the 1,300-year-old tree, or at least one that towers above the others just like it, and remember the day Andy and his friends took me there two years ago.

It's a scene I've reflected on too often. Much like this one on the ridge with the sun now gone and the sky red like saffron. I remember skiing quiet and fast through the massive trees, the slope dropping away into a tight draw and then opening onto an apron of untracked powder. I recall thinking that with all this opportunity and development, something may have been lost here. Then I remember feeling this strange sensation as we turned on each other's tails—that whatever may have been lost was heavily outweighed by what was yet to be discovered—and much of it lay just beneath us through the trees. ❁

