

A Green and Clean City in a Foreigner's Eye

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Sofia

Sofia is a green, clean and well organized city. This is not a dream, nor a prophecy but the opinion of foreigners from various countries, who have seen the capital with Free Sofia Tour. The visitors are pleasantly surprised by the explanation that part of this greenness is due to gardens "adopted" by private companies. Another prevailing perception among the guests is that everybody in Sofia speaks English and is always willing to help with directions or information, Kristian, Vanya and Boyko - three of the Free Sofia Tour volunteers - told BTA.

The free English-language walking tour of Sofia started on August 13 last year. It's organized daily by a group of young enthusiasts. Along with today's change to summertime the tour would already be organized twice a day - at 11 am and 6 pm, seven days a week, regardless of weather.

More than 500 people from dozens of countries from all over the world have participated in Free Sofia Tour - most of them from Germany, the US, the UK, France, Spain, Australia, Poland, Belgium, Austria, Portugal but also from India, Malaysia, Canada, Brazil, Argentina, Peru and even Rwanda. Some of them had been working in Bulgaria for months or years but have never before found time to really see Sofia, while for others Sofia had been just a spot on the map. Some people come because the cheapest plane tickets brought them to Sofia, while for others Sofia was in the holiday plans for months. Why would you go to Paris for the thirteenth time when you can see Sofia for the first time, as a girl from one of Boyko's groups said. For many, Sofia is an exotic destination.

Foreigners find exotic even things that we consider ugly, Vanya told us.

"Lennon? There was a Lennon monument here?!", asked an American, after learning what used to be on the spot of today's St. Sophia statue. He was quickly given the information about Lenin on Lenin Square, said Kristian.

"Who's that guy?", asked a Taiwanese after seeing Jesus on the ceiling of the St. George Rotunda. Vanya and the other organizers of the tour also often have to answer the question why the Rotunda is hidden. Once, visitors even asked if the Thracians had been cavemen.

Is that the central train station, foreigners often ask when the tour takes them to the Halite covered market in central Sofia. They are also amazed by the mineral water. "They often ask how we heat the water. Nobody even suspected that Sofia has hot mineral springs", Kristian told us.

Some foreigners know more about Sofia than many Sofianites do. One Hungarian from one of Vanya's groups had written a university paper on the Church of St. Petka of the Saddlers and decided to come and see it. He was fascinated by the church and the city and became an enthusiastic promoter of Bulgaria in his home



country. One American, coming from Frankfurt, liked life in Sofia so much he now wants to open a hostel here. Impressed by his first visit to the Bulgarian capital was also Simeon from Australia. "In the motherland of his father he learned from us about Simeon the Great and Simeon Saxe-Coburg-Gotha", Boyko told us.

Foreigners are captivated by the beautiful buildings in central Sofia and amused by what is locally known as "klekshops" - from the Bulgarian word for "squat" and the English "shop", small basement-level snack, drink and cigarette outlets where you have to squat to tell the shopkeeper what you are buying. They find fascination in the five-point red star from the former Communist party headquarters and omnipresent obituaries on the walls and trees. They think the obituaries are notices for missing or wanted people.

They are surprised by the large number of casinos; by the cafes and restaurants that are crowded when everyone complains about the crisis; by the fact that the menus in the restaurants indicate the weight of the portions which most people find really convenient; by the many American goods - even an American was surprised by the large number of McDonalds restaurants in Sofia; by the many theatres in Sofia and the crowds of theatre-goers; by the booth for the traffic policemen on the corner of Rakovski Street and Tsar Osoboditel Boulevard; by the martenitsas, the red-and-white wool amulets for good luck and health Bulgarians wear in early spring by a century-old tradition and then hang on trees when they see the first stork.

Enchanted by the martenitsa tradition, an Israeli couple bought a martenitsa for their daughter because she wanted to have a second child.

Each one of the tours that the ten Free Sofia Tour volunteers organize is unique. The tour includes not only stories about archaeological sites, buildings, squares, churches, mosques, traditions and customs but sometimes even up-to-date political information, triggered by the tourists' questions. As in the case of the "NOT FOR SALE" sign put up on the building of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences during the recent protests there

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against underfunding and planned restructuring. Vanya says that since she started organizing the tours she has turned into an avid watcher of the newscasts to stay apace with the latest developments in the country.

People ask them all kinds of things - from "Why is the lion a Bulgarian symbol" to "What is the average salary in Bulgaria?" The guides don't know the answers and they are not shy to say "I don't know". Sometimes during a tour they would call each other for help with a tricky question.

Vanya, Kristian and Boyko are aware of the fund shortage and say Sofia does not need expensive and ineffective projects for its promotion but small, clever and enthusiastic steps. One such thing is updating the publicly accessible information about Sofia on Wikitravel and TripAdvisor. Often, these are the first source of information for anybody who plans a trip to Bulgaria. The information that is now available is sketchy, incom-

plete and contradictory. The press-service of the European Parliament, for example, updates regularly the information about the EP on Wikipedia, Boyko says.

They are adamant that it's important to look for modern and working solutions that often do not require a lot of money.

Advertising is important but it is even more important to have adequate substance behind the commercials to make sure the guests don't get disappointed. "If you stand at the Presidency, there's nothing to guide your way through the abundance of ancient archeology, history and culture all around. Is it that expensive to put signs pointing to the sites?" the three guides ask.

Tourists also complain about other "minor" absurdities - the Archaeological Museum has no tourist guides, there's only one hard-to-find bus going to Rila Monastery and a certain tourist agency "doesn't work with foreigners".

The volunteers of the Free Sofia Tour Association do not want to put

all responsibility on the State or the Town Hall. They do - and plan to do more - small and unorthodox steps to promote Sofia and create a better living and tourist environment in the city. They try to help their guests even after the tour - such as give directions to the nearest Laundromat, for example. They exchange experience, ideas and information with a number of similar organizations across the world. They even "export" Bulgarian know-how. By the way, the step forward is part of the new logo of the tour. □



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