

NEWS BRIEFS

ENFORCEMENT

Health inspectors have detected more than 2000 violations of the ban on smoking in public places, Bulgarian media reported. Authorities began actively verifying compliance with the ban, which went into force in December 2010, in February, with inspectors carrying out "systematic checks" in restaurants and bars. Since February 14, regional health

inspectors across the country have checked 27 031 establishments, including restaurants, offices, hotels, hospitals, schools, train and bus stations. The most common violations were the lack of clear marking of the designated areas for smokers or non-smokers, problems with ventilation systems or the presence of children in smoking areas. The authorities have said that checks would continue.



SCHENGEN TECHNICALITIES

The European Council's work-

ing group evaluating the progress of Bulgaria and Romania towards joining the Schengen visa-free travel area has concluded that Bulgaria had complied with all the necessary technical requirements for joining, Boiko Kotsev, Bulgaria's permanent representative at the European Commission, said on April 4 2011. The report clearly said that the country met all Schengen criteria for land border security,

Kotsev said.

TWO-TRACK JUSTICE

US ambassador to Bulgaria James Warlick has criticised the country's judicial system, branding it dishonest and corrupt, as well as operating double standards, during a discussion on national security and crime-fighting strategy in Sofia on April 5. There were two justice systems in the country,

one for the affluent and powerful, who remained above the law and often bypassed justice, and another for ordinary Bulgarians, Warlick said. His statement drew an immediate rebuttal from prosecutor-general Boris Velchev and the head of the Supreme Court of Cassation, Lazar Groev, who described Warlick's words as unjustified, unacceptable and "insulting to Bulgarian magistrates".

The Red Star?

The Free Sofia Tour will show you some of the city's hidden secrets

Gabriel Hershman

Sofia is such an agreeably compact metropolis in that most of its sites - its truly beautiful monuments - are in the city centre. The only exception perhaps is the Boyana Church. But other than that, its attractions are ideal for a walking tour.

Readers may remember that we once reviewed the sightseeing bus that left from in front of Alexander Nevsky. This has now folded because of the crisis and, to be honest, it's no great loss because, seen from on high, Sofia can seem a bit shabby. Its suburbs are, of course, far worse; we often joke that visitors should be blindfolded at the airport and only unmasked in the

historic centre.

Ungallant although it may be to say it, the Bulgarian capital is not comparable to Prague or Budapest, both compulsory attractions on the eastern Europe Grand Tour. Even so, Sofia improves with knowing. Just overlook the "Stalinist" housing estates - as dubbed (not entirely accurately) in a recent UK Daily Telegraph piece by Gail Simmons - as well as some of the gaudy, neoclassical, "wedding cake" architecture. Concentrate instead on the magnificent churches and you will be more favourably disposed. Not to mention the wonderful restaurants - often set in relaxing gardens - charming cafes, spacious green areas and quaint side streets.



WHERE IS THIS? I'm not telling you. Go on the tour

Photo: Gabriel Hershman

Sofia improves with knowing. Just overlook the 'Stalinist' housing estates - as well as some of the gaudy, neoclassical, 'wedding cake' architecture.

your time.

Tours start at the Vitosha Blvd. and Alabin Str. crossing every day at 11am and 6pm. One of the first attractions is Svetiya Nedelya Church, scene of one of Bulgaria's worst atrocities in 1925 when more than 200 people were killed in an assassination plot against King Boris.

The tour then proceeds to the "square of tolerance" where you can find the Banya Bashi Mosque, Catholic church and Sofia Synagogue all in close proximity. Other stops include the Archaeological Museum, Ivan Vazov National Theatre (perhaps Sofia's most beautiful building) the Russian Church, Alexander Nevsky cathedral (perhaps the city's most iconic building), Hagya Sophia Church and Sofia University.

Boyko answered all our questions readily and expertly. The tour is entirely run by a team of volunteers of which Boyko is one. You need not reserve for the tour. Just show up. It's also quite a nice way to meet new people. On my tour there was a Spanish girl living in Devon, a Turkish guy from Istanbul, a Canadian visitor and two Israelis. You'll be sure to learn something new on this tour and you may even find yourself dancing the hora with your fellow sightseers. e

Even when an adopted Sofian like myself (my home city of four years) goes on a tour like this, there are always surprises in store. I didn't know, to cite but a few examples, the exact location of Georgi Dimitrov's former mausoleum. Or that

some of the musical notes to Ode to Joy (Beethoven's ninth symphony) can be found above the former Tsar's place on Battenburg Str. Or that the red star that once stood atop Party House on Dondukov Blvd. - until 1990 the seat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party - can still be seen in Sofia. No, it's not in a museum to communism because, shamefully, no such place exists. Nei-

ther will I tell you where it is. You'll have to go on the tour to find out. But - when you do find it - you may ask this question: Is it THE red star that was dismantled in 1990? The mystery deepens...

I concluded that perhaps I've spent too much time gawping at Sofia's other beauties rather than its impressive buildings. Rest assured, however, that I do know that Sofia has a spectacular mountain in the background. And tell me of another European capital that has that.

My guide Boyko Blagoev was a mine of information. If other guides are as knowledgeable as him then it's well worth two hours of


HRG Bulgaria



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