

Post of the Month:

# Sofia

By Keith Hughes



**B**ulgaria is an ancient country transitioning from a totalitarian state to a free and democratic society on the cusp of full NATO membership. Hampered for many years by memories from its pro-Soviet past, Bulgaria's image is rapidly changing after its aggressive pursuit of NATO and EU memberships and its prominent participation in the recent coalition against Saddam Hussein.

Bulgaria's land and culture are rich with treasures from its history. Great powers and civilizations have come and gone: Macedonia, Greece, Rome, Byzantium, the Ottoman Empire and the Soviet Union. Thracians left tombs from antiquity filled with masterworks of gold. Rome left unparalleled engineering marvels. Byzantium left

European pressure to break ranks. Bulgaria has also hosted two U.S. Air Force deployments in the past 18 months in the Black Sea port city of Bourgas to support Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom. The nation is also providing troops to peace-keeping operations in Afghanistan, Bosnia and Kosovo. A onetime staunch Warsaw Pact member, Bulgaria has undertaken the difficult and sometimes painful task of transforming itself into a nation aligned with Western values, seeking earnestly to integrate with the rest of Europe and NATO.

The current U.S. Mission in Sofia numbers almost 400 U.S. and Bulgarian employees. It supports Bulgaria's policy of integration and provides assistance through most



Photos courtesy of the U.S. Embassy in Sofia

*A CLO-organized shopping trip for carpets in the Bulgarian countryside.*

the mystery of Orthodox Christianity and the Ottomans left their exotic mark on Bulgarian architecture, language and cuisine. The currents of history continue to have an impact on the nation today.

More recently, Bulgaria has been one of America's closest allies, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with the United States in the U.N. Security Council despite heavy

of the dozen agencies working in the mission. The U.S. Agency for International Development, for example, promotes grassroots democracy, judicial reform and a market economy. The U.S. Commercial Service advances U.S. investment and trade. The Department of Justice, through the resident legal adviser, is fighting corruption and reforming the judicial system.







The nation's links with the West were confirmed last May when Pope John Paul II visited Sofia and NATO's parliamentary assembly held its biannual conference there. While Bulgaria's institutions and systems are influenced by its ancient heritage, it is clearly remaking itself into a modern European nation.

**BELOW:** Mike Seidenstricker, public affairs officer, discusses Secretary Powell's visit last May with FSNs Raissa Yordanova and Mlada Todorova.



**ABOVE:** Secretary Powell speaks to U.S. Embassy families.  
**LEFT:** A typical ski run on Mt. Vitosha.

Bulgaria stood at a historical crossroads more than a decade ago when the communist party leadership overthrew the communist dictatorship of Todor Zhivkov. The road Bulgaria chose was not easy and in the past 10 years the country has struggled. Despite this, Bulgaria is now recognised as an engine of stability in Southeast Europe.

The U.S. Mission in Sofia currently occupies 10 aging and vulnerable buildings throughout the city. To remedy this situation, ground was broken in June 2002 to make way for a new chancery building. The new facility will help the mission in Sofia nurture a strong bilateral relationship with Bulgaria more efficiently and effectively.





**TOP:** An artist's rendering of the new U.S. Embassy in Sofia.  
**ABOVE:** Officials break ground for the new chancery scheduled for occupancy in August 2004.

The project will also be the first U.S.-constructed building in Bulgaria.

The new mission compound will occupy nearly 10 acres and have a state-of-the-art perimeter security system. The chancery will occupy 136,000 square feet and will include a warehouse and housing for Marines. The new office building is expected to be completed in August 2004. It represents a significant financial investment that will yield benefits for the local economy. During construction, approximately 350 local workers

will be employed and construction materials such as concrete, steel and gravel will be purchased locally.

Meanwhile, Bulgaria was officially invited to join NATO during the Prague Summit last November and the United States Senate voted 90 to 0 to ratify its accession into the organization this past May. The mission will continue to work with Bulgaria to finalize the remaining aspects of the accession process.

Militarily, Bulgaria has proved that it stands with the United States in the struggle against terrorism and weapons of mass destruction. Shortly after Operation Iraqi Freedom began, Bulgaria provided flyover rights to U.S. military planes operating in the region. In addition, Sarafovo airport in Bourgas was used for refueling operations over the Black Sea—involving six KC-10 tankers and more than 300 U.S. military personnel.

To educate Bulgarian journalists covering NATO issues, the public affairs section sponsored journalists to Brussels for tours and briefings at NATO and SHAPE, created a lecture series with a local nongovernmental organization and arranged digital video conferences with State Department officials.

Grappling with NATO accession issues, promoting trade, crafting programs to help Bulgaria fight corruption and building a new chancery would seem to command employees' total attention, but there is some time for leisure. To help with the transition is the mission's Community Liaison Office. The CLO offers newcomers a more relaxed view of life in Sofia and acquaints them

with the quality academics at the American College of Sofia and the Anglo-American School.

The number and variety of restaurants is mushrooming in Sofia and prices have remained reasonable by Western standards. Bulgaria boasts some of the freshest and highest-quality fruits and vegetables in the region. Nestled in the valley between Vitosha Mountain and the Balkan range, Sofia is a short drive from several renowned sites of stunning beauty and historical significance. Rila Monastery, for example, embodies the rich heritage of Orthodox Christianity while the Boyana Church harbors rare frescoes of unsurpassed power and charm.

The Balkan winter and the nearby mountains make Bulgaria a skier's heaven, while in the summer the mountains are an inviting place to hike or picnic. Tour groups offer everything from sightseeing excursions to long journeys on horseback to extreme sports. While not always up to Western standards, a stop at one of the

many hot spring resorts that dot the country will be rewarding. Of course, every Bulgarian will wax eloquent about the wonders of the Black Sea coast and no trip to



*A group ski outing on Mt. Vitosha, only 20 minutes from the city center.*

Bulgaria is truly complete without a pilgrimage there. What's more, Turkey and Greece are within a day's drive of Sofia. Turkey offers all the exotic enticements of the Orient and Greece will host next summer's Olympics.

Bulgaria offers the best of two worlds for a diplomat. Politically and economically the challenges Bulgaria

faces and has set for itself guarantee that work here for Foreign Service officers will be challenging and rewarding. Since the country is stable and has been throughout the years of troubles that have beset the Balkans, the quality of life and the opportunities to explore the country are abundant. ■

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## A Century-Old Relationship

While there have been peaks and valleys in U.S.-Bulgarian relations over the last century, the U.S. Embassy in Bulgaria is proud to celebrate the 100-year anniversary of diplomatic relations between our two countries this year. Secretary Powell affirmed during his May visit to Sofia that ties between the two countries have never been better. A new invitee to NATO and a staunch U.S. supporter on the U.N. Security Council and in the Global War on Terrorism, Bulgaria has emerged as one of the region's closest U.S. allies.

On Sept. 19, 1903, a court carriage drawn by four horses and led by a cavalry escort delivered John B. Jackson, the first U.S. envoy to Bulgaria, to the National Palace in the center of Sofia. Mr. Jackson's presentation of credentials to Prince Ferdinand, the grandfather of Bulgaria's democratically elected prime minister, launched a sometimes turbulent

relationship that has seen diplomatic intrigue, periodic hostility and, since the collapse of communism in 1989, a close partnership based on shared values.

The Secretary's visit to Sofia officially kicked off anniversary celebrations that will span several months, culminating in an intense series of events on and around the Sept. 19 centennial date. The highlight of the Secretary's stay in Sofia was a major public rally in Battenberg Square in front of the palace where Mr. Jackson first presented his credentials. Addressing a crowd of 5,000 cheering Bulgarian citizens, senior government officials and foreign diplomats, Secretary Powell pointed to the two enormous Bulgarian and American flags dominating the square and declared, "I hope that our two countries will always be as close as these two beautiful flags are today." *John E. Johnson*