

Believing in Bulgaria

By Amir Izadi

“Bang” went the sound of our wheel hitting a pothole. We were driving at a snail’s pace already and suddenly we were stopped. We got out and examined the tire, which was flat as a pancake. “It’s only the bottom half that’s flat,” I said “the top half is still good.” Martin was in no joking mood. He pointed to the rim, which had a six-inch dent in it from the impact of the hole.



We had been driving 18 hours already from Slovenia and were less than thirty minutes from our final destination of Sopot, Bulgaria in a heavily overloaded Skoda. Martin had done his best to avoid the potholes on this stretch of mountainous, windy road in the dead of night amidst frequent downpours, but a flat was inevitable since the rain filled potholes were too numerous and obscure to be avoided completely. Later, we were to learn that a group of Austrian pilots had two flats simultaneously the same evening in the same section of road.



My travelling companions were fellow Canadian, Annelies Browne and Czech pilot, Martin Pacejka. Annelies is one of the most active pilots I know. She’s flying every chance she gets, even if it’s just a sled ride. In a mere two years she’s racked up some 300 hours and commendably even managed to win a task in the Czech Open a week earlier against some very stiff female competition. She’s very talkative and enthusiastic and is forever cracking jokes and laughing herself silly.

Martin couldn’t be more different. Quiet, shy, and reserved he’s always putting others before himself. One day, during the competition, Martin spent half an hour helping Annelies repair her torn wing on launch while everyone else took off. Martin’s English was not very good and he had the habit of breaking into German mid-sentence when he got excited about something.

By the time we changed the tire and pulled into Sopot it was 2 am. The organizers, Nikolay and Johannes, were still up working the bugs out of their computer before the

competition started the next morning. They were buzzing on adrenalin (or Red Bull) and had us registered in no time and shortly after dispatched a driver to help us find accommodation. We struck out on the first two hotels which were either booked or the owners were too lazy to come to the door at that time of the night. Third time lucky, the owner of a private home gave us accommodation. I dragged my stuff into a large room made small by another pilot's paragliding gear strewn about the room. He was happily snoring away and soon I did the same.



The next day, I woke up to the familiar sound of Elizabeth Rauchenberger's laughter at the breakfast table sharing stories with a group of other pilots. I had met Elizabeth a couple of times before at other competitions and she was here as the official World Cup

observer but would also be competing. At a mere 125 lbs she has to carry a lot of ballast to fly a small glider. Her gear alone weighs 80lb. In my chivalrous way I would try to help her with her bag, but after a couple attempts I gave up and asked her to help me with mine.



Bulgaria is a classic, old-fashioned Eastern European country that is a traveller's paradise since it is incredibly unspoiled and inexpensive.

The old towns of Plotvin and Sophia are beautiful and picturesque boasting Roman amphitheatres amidst 17th century mosques and churches. The Black Sea is a popular destination with Europeans for good reason. The water is warm and clean and long stretches of unspoiled beaches consisting of flat, quartz-like pebbles line the shore.

Our accommodation was situated on a hillside only minutes from the central square. The six Euro a night included a hearty breakfast, which we had on the terrace overlooking the town. The ancient character of Sopot was clearly visible with its stone houses and windy, cobblestone streets. As with most developing countries, there is a marked contrast





between the older generation who are dressed conservatively as if they are going to church everyday (and which they seem to here), and the young generation who emulate the kids in the west with their clothes and music. In spite of its small size (my guess, 10,000 inhabitants), Sopot has a high-speed Internet café in town and several decent restaurants and even a disco.

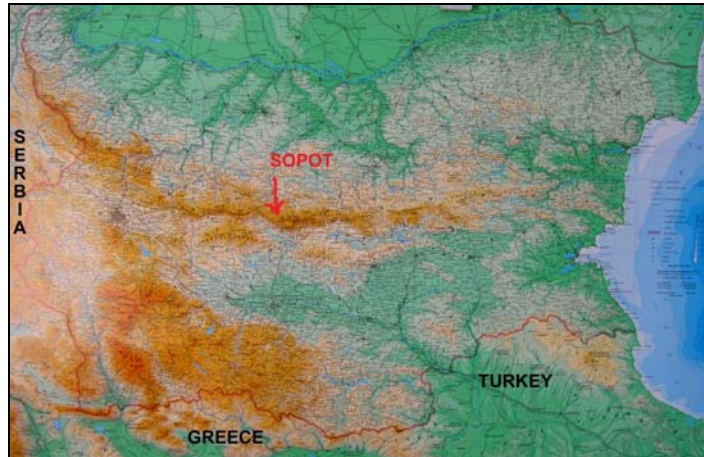
After breakfast, we all headed up to the headquarters situated at the base of the mountain we would be flying from. More than 100 pilots from 15 nations were gathered here as Nikolay welcomed everybody and informed us of the daily schedule. We would be taking an old but functional chair lift up to launch every day. It was built in the early 70s by the communist government for the exclusive use of hang gliders as a way of promoting the sport during the days when aviation still had lots of sex appeal. Getting on a fast moving chair lift two-by-two with a glider was easy compared to getting off, which required jumping to the side deftly with a heavy glider in tow. After the first day, I opted to go solo with my glider occupying the seat next to me.



The actual launch, a further 200m hike up, sits at 850m ASL and is a large, lightly sloped grassy meadow that can easily accommodate 100 gliders or more. It's an idiot-proof launch, as nice as it gets, but unfortunately the only one designated for the competition which forced us to cancel two of the six days because the wind was blowing over the back in otherwise perfectly flyable conditions. The primary mountain range faces south and reaches a height of almost 9000 feet in the back ranges. It consists of a combination of deciduous trees lower down, tall grass in the middle and rocky outcroppings higher up. The whole range extends nearly 500 km, running from the Serbian border



to just short of the Black Sea. It is theoretically possible to fly that distance on a good day, but it includes some challenging valley crossings. No one's ever done that, but in 2003 Nikolay launched from Sopot and headed south across the flats towards Turkey for a Bulgarian record of 205km. Had he had his passport with him, he could've flown further.



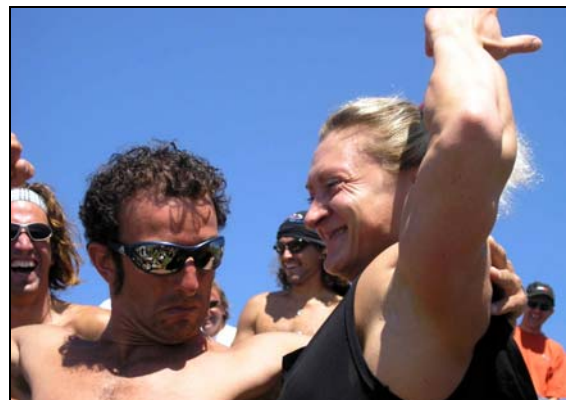
As we were sitting on launch the first day of the competition waiting for the briefing, Nikolay said he had someone special he wished to introduce to us: the Bulgarian Miss



Universe. Our attentions peaked. We looked and saw a rather large person stand up and walk to the front. "But she's not that pretty" said Elizabeth. "Is it even a she?" I asked, similarly bewildered. Not until she started speaking in a deep, husky voice did it click that she was indeed the female bodybuilding champion of the world. "Hello gentlemen" she said slowly in a dark, seductively stern voice as if she were a jail warden

ready to give us an order we dare not refuse. "I want you to know how beautiful you all are." We held our breath. "And I want to wish you all so much success in this competition and I hope you all win." We let out a sigh of relief. Then she took off her track top and revealed a steroid sculpted physique that rivalled Arnold Schwarzenegger's. Mayhem and laughter ensued as everyone jostled for position to photograph their body next to Miss Universe's while she assumed her championship poses.

On the first day of the competition a 68 km task was called along the main mountain range. Over half the field made goal with the top pilots averaging 32 km/h and only stopping to thermal three or four times during the entire task. With the memory of this first day's experience under their belt, for the remainder of the competition many pilots decided they weren't going to thermal at all on strong days and see how fast they could go. Their strategy backfired as often they all





ended up quite low and the next group of pilots quickly caught up and overtook them. Finding the right balance between speed and patience is important in any competition.

The second task was a long triangle out into the flats of the Rose Valley. The lead gaggle pushed out way ahead and all promptly sank out in the flats, which weren't quite working yet. I and three others, in hot pursuit, could clearly see which line they had taken, so we took a more direct route and landed about 5 km further all within 100m of each other but still well short of goal. I was busy congratulating myself since I figured it was too stable a day and no one could've flown further than us, when I looked up and saw about 30 gliders all coming over our heads at about 2000m. The valley had finally kicked off and the slower pilots had all managed to go double

the distance with several landing very close to goal.

One Bulgarian pilot decided to take an entirely different route. He worked some low-lying foothills for over an hour getting pushed further and further up into the mountains. Finally, after an hour, he landed next to a stone hut far from any road or village. An old shepherd came out of the hut ecstatic, jumping up and down waving a bottle of vodka and yelling "I believe, I believe". Apparently, in Bulgaria it is considered bad luck to drink by yourself, so the old man had prayed to God to send him someone he could drink with and out of nowhere had popped in our pilot.



One of the best things about attending international competitions is the interesting people you meet. Leo Westerkamp is one such pilot who can best be described as a romantic nomad with a wicked sense of humour. During the summer months, he leaves his home in Holland and drives around Europe and Asia in an old van stock piled with enough food to seemingly see him through any detour in life. Never one to be in any hurry, he's often flying alone, savouring every minute of his flight. Sometimes he

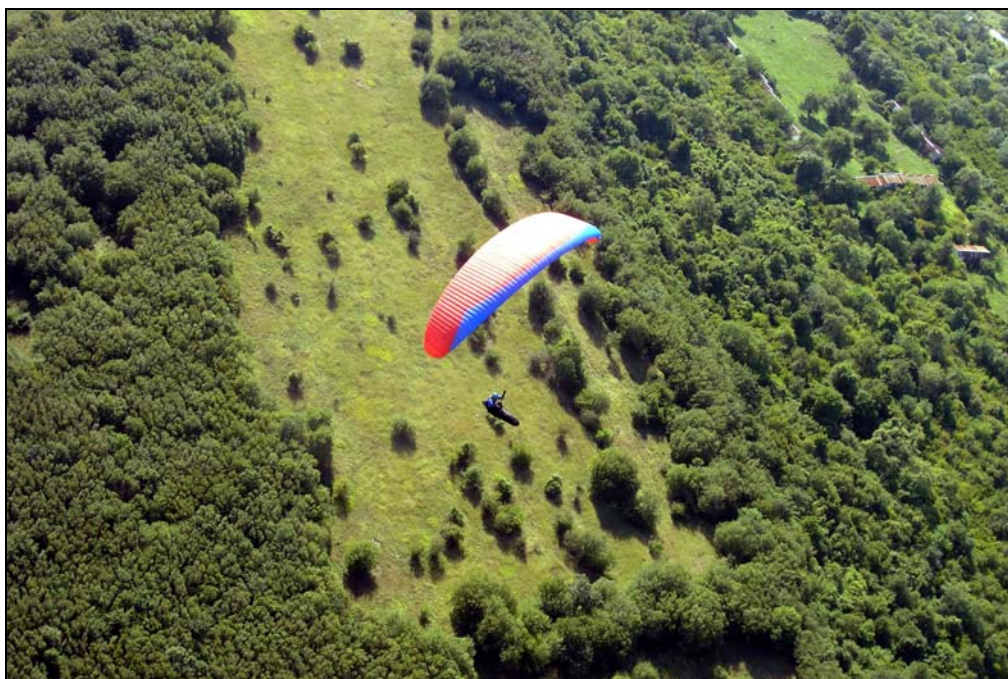
comes into goal two hours after the leaders and always with a big grin on his face.

One day, he out-landed and was approached by a curious, impoverished looking barefoot gypsy boy. Leo was calling for a retrieve on his mobile phone while the boy stared at him with large innocent eyes. When he finished his call, the boy shyly asked to see the mobile phone. Leo handed it to him and proceeded to patiently explain its function. The gypsy boy immediately ran off with the phone to Leo's amazement. A chase ensued with Leo shouting obscenities as the boy zigzagged across the dirt road. The boy ducked into a nearby village and solicited help from his friends who grabbed their sticks and proceeded to confront Leo. At the sight of the stick-wielding gypsy boys, Leo did an about



face and started running back down the road. He flagged down a passing car full of grown men, who, alert to what was happening, got out and started chasing the boys. Eventually, the boy who stole the phone threw it to the ground dashed off back to his village. None of the Bulgarians believed Leo's story, but he's not one to make things up, only the kind of person to whom odd and comical things seem to happen.

As for the competition, it was a great success and there will be a World Cup hosted in Bulgaria in April of 2005. We had four out of six valid tasks but had there been north-facing launch that could accommodate as many pilots we would've flown every day. World Cup pilots, Urban Valic from Slovenia and Orlin Dimov from Bulgaria were first and second respectively. Keiko Kiraki of Japan won the women's section.





After the competition, a group of us headed toward the Black Sea, guests of Slavi, one of the nicest pilots I've ever met and an ex-X-Alps competitor. One night, after a day of flying near the historical site of Madara and a bout of drinking afterwards with a bunch of local pilots, we got stopped by a police road-block. The officer was carefully scrutinizing Leo's driver license and asking him how much he'd had to drink when I heard some yelling. I looked out the window and saw our

local pilot friend, who we'd been drinking with earlier, sitting at the wheel of his dilapidated old car going backwards in neutral with the engine off. He was yelling instructions to a group of officers that had given him a push but failed to start his car and was now soliciting more help from the two officers who'd stopped our car. The two quickly left our side and ran to catch up with his car to give it a further push.

"But that man is drunk!" said Leo in complete disbelief. "They're going to help him start his car, and they're asking me how much I've been drinking?"

Unbeknownst to us, our local pilot friend happened to be the chief of police. Having succeeded in getting the car started, he forgot the emergency brake and got out while the car was still rolling backwards to come over and say goodbye. The car shut off again, he looked back, shrugged, then bid us farewell and ran to catch up with his car. We drove away in silence, stunned, wondering if what we had just witnessed was for real or a movie. Finally, when we were out of earshot, we all burst out in uncontrollable laughter.



Bulgaria is a pilot's dream and a traveller's haven. The flying is relatively consistent and the thermals moderately strong from 4-6m/s. The area is not particularly prone to high winds and there are plenty of landing options everywhere with good road access and public transport. There is an abundance of things to see and do other than flying and everything is incredibly inexpensive making an

extended trip there very affordable. With all that Bulgaria has to offer it is a wonder why it hasn't become more of a popular flying destination. That should all change very soon with the upcoming World Cup, its legacy of communism waning and its likely entry into the European Union within the next ten years. There are many reasons to believe in Bulgaria.

Amir Izadi is the owner and operator of Blue Thermal Paragliding located in Victoria, BC. Anyone contemplating on flying in Bulgaria – as in anywhere abroad– should carry out-of-country emergency medical insurance. For more information about flying in Bulgaria contact: www.skynomad.com

