



BULGARIA: THE FUTURE GOLF DESTINATION IN SOUTH-EASTERN EUROPE

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The first golf course was built in Bulgaria in 1992 close to Sofia. The idea was to build up a resort complex with a 9-hole golf course, rooms and flats to rent, restaurants, etc. But the first attempt turned out to be unsuccessful.

Today there are two golf courses in the country and two golf organizations. Both courses are property of Air Sofia Airplane Company. The club in Ihtiman was opened in 2000. It is built on 550 decares and disposes of 18 holes and a hotel complex with 6 single and 32 double rooms and 3 flats. Furthermore, there are luxurious houses built in different styles. The guests may also enjoy two tennis courts, football pitch, swimming pool, equestrian base, volleyball playground, bowling room, night bar, conference rooms, etc. In the opinion of Georgi Ivanov, the first President of the Club, who is more popular as the first Bulgarian space-man, there are more than 100 Bulgarians, who participate on a regular basis in tournaments organized there.

On May 24, 2004 in a mountain region Sliven in the central part of the country a second golf course was opened. It is built up on 500 decares and has got 18 holes. Later on a hotel complex will be built too.

As per the owners only the maintenance of a golf course of such class costs EUR 20.000 per month. The cost of the construction of the course in Sliven was over EUR 600.000.

The schedule of Air Sofia comprises also the construction of a third course in the northeastern part of the country. The owners of Air Sofia believe that this would support the development of the mass sport for the golfers will not have to travel long distances to practice their favorite game. Yet three golf courses would presuppose more tournaments. Besides, the construction of a golf course close to Sofia is plan-

ned. Actually negotiations are carried out for the purchase of the land.

Several foreign investors have shown interest in investing in the construction of golf courses in Bulgaria. For the time being the main drawback is the legal impossibility to purchase land. Therefore, variants involving joint ventures are looked for.

This year Air Sofia established a joint venture with the Spanish El Platino Club de Golf. The joint venture Golf Creations (51% Bulgarian participation) proceeded to the updating of the course in Ihtiman, the construction in Sliven and is ready to invest in the new golf course to be constructed near Sofia. Also they have got some plans for construction works alongside the Black Sea coast. Golf Creations managed to change the category of the course in Ihtiman from Par 71 to Par 72 so that international tournaments of Championships category can be carried out there.

On the other hand, the schedule of the municipality authority of the well-known ski resort Bansko provides the construction of a golf course.

Many people desire to construct golf courses alongside the Black Sea coast. A Holland company is building Gold and Beach vacation resort near the town of Pomorie. They plan to build a golf course too. The London based International Golf Association is negotiating with the Primorsko municipality authority about the construction and operation of a golf course. This project is associated with the construction of a hotel complex to the south of Primorsko, close to Ropotamo - one of the most beautiful Bulgarian rivers.

The construction of a golf course is foreseen in Albena - one of the best-known Black Sea resorts.

Varna, the sea capital of the country, also foresees the construction of a golf course. There the potential investor is Mr. Ignat Kaneff - a Bulgarian residing in

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Canada. The Bulgarian-Canadian millionaire is known for his main incomes coming from constructions of golf courses. Some of the courses, built by him, are on the list of the best American and Canadian golf courses. Mr. Kaneff told the Varna municipality authority that he was ready to invest up to USD 20M in golf in the region but he needs areas between 500 and 800 decares.

Bulgarian tourism relays a lot on the golf. It is well known that the golf is not restricted to the terrain but it involves many buildings - clubhouse, sport equipment, changing-rooms, warehouses, shops, etc. Golf tourists are staid people, usually over 50. They look for a good golf course but they never neglect their habits that include excellent cuisine, luxurious hotel and expensive shops. They would accept each interesting tourist opportunity as a challenge.

Last year over than 3,5M tourists visited Bulgaria and spent approximately USD 2

million. If only a small part of these tourists are golfers, their stay would influence the incomes for it is known that golfers spent up to 10 times more than the 'conventional' tourists.

The golf is a very quickly developing industry and this will also involve a rapid development of the Bulgarian tourism.

According to Rumen Draganov, General Secretary of the Bulgarian Golf Federation, actually there are approximately 200 Bulgarians practicing this sport. The Federation considers that the greater number of golf courses will result in increased number of Bulgarian golfers. These will be people having the necessary means to travel and practicing their favorite (expensive) sport they will spend money, which will contribute to the development of the respective infrastructure. "If we want to develop the golf, we do not have to rely only on foreigners. The more Bulgarians practice this

sport, the more it will become popular in the country and thus the country will become a popular golf destination." he added

The interests in this sphere are associated with the financing opportunities upon different European programs, including the pre-association programs for accession of Bulgaria into the European Union.

Golf is not a seasonal sport. In Bulgaria it could be practiced at least ten months per year.

For many years the golf has not been only a game. This is particularly due to the tourist agencies that sell it. As many other things, the golf is offered in packages that blend the well-known game with culture, history, wines, cuisine, etc. And these are the things that Bulgaria can offer on a large scale. The Bulgarian tourism relays on the golf, which in its turn will make profit of the superb offers that Bulgaria can make as unique tourist destination.

