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Homes & Property

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ECONOMY HIT BY BIGGEST SURGE IN UNEMPLOYMENT SINCE RECESSION

SHOCK FIGURES ON LONDON'S JOBLESS

NATIONAL OUT OF WORK TOTAL HITS 2.49 MILLION

Jonathan Prynn
Consumer Business Editor

THE biggest surge in dole queues since the recession today dealt a huge blow to hopes of an economic recovery.

In London unemployment rose by 22,000 to pass the 400,000 mark for the first time in 15 years.

The national unemployment total also shot up more than forecast, soaring 38,000 to reach 2.49 million – most of the jobs lost were women's.

Economist Tony Dolphin said: "Women have been hit hardest and have suffered disproportionately badly in this latest rise of unemployment."

One in five 16- to 24-year-olds is out of work. The shock figures showed the number of people signing on for Job-seeker's Allowance went up 37,100 last month, the highest monthly rise since May 2009.

Dave Prentis, of the union Unison, said the Government's "savage" cuts have ended opportunities in the public sector and the private sector is struggling to withstand the downturn, adding: "The Government's strategy is in tatters."

The setback comes against a backdrop of weeks of turmoil in the financial markets and an alarming slowdown in growth in the euro zone, Britain's biggest export market.

The surge will pile more pressure on Chancellor George Osborne to come up with more effective measures to boost growth at a time of huge cuts in government spending. Employment minister Chris Grayling said the rapidly rising

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Party time: Simon Bird and Emily Atack, stars of The Inbetweeners, enjoy the after party at Aqua following the new movie's world premiere at Vue West End last night

FULL STORY: Page 9

INBETWEENERS CELEBRATE

Riot suspect saved from jail by footballer

Justin Davenport
Crime Editor

A PREMIER League footballer saved his riot suspect nephew from jail after offering him a place to live outside London.

The footballer agreed to provide a ball address for the 17-year-old who allegedly took part in attacks on police in Brixton.

Inner London crown court heard how the youth was among a group of up to 15 caught on CCTV hurling sticks and spades at officers. The footballer's nephew was allegedly pictured on CCTV among the throng as he wielded a bottle.

The teenager, whose mother is a solicitor, was remanded at Feltham Young Offender Institute and did not appear at the bail hearing.

He was granted bail on condition of residence, a curfew between 7pm and 7am, and a ban from coming within the M25.

Riots aftermath Pages 4-6

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Mountain rescue: left, the view from the restored 19th-century Villa Gella; top, the exterior; above, the Terrace room; below, the Stripe bedroom



LIVING THE HIGH LIFE

WE may have expanded the European Union east but we are slower to accord it holiday status.

Instead, it has a patronising association with cheap workforces and stag weekends. No one expects you to explain a summer holiday in France, Spain or Italy but the response was quizzical when I told family and colleagues that I was off to Bulgaria. So much so that I tried a total re-branding. My summer holiday was spent in Thrace, in the very village that gave birth to Orpheus.

Wrestle yourself away from crippled Greece across the border into the Thracian Rhodope mountains and you will find spectacular scenery, a fascinating mix of birds, butterflies, flora and fauna, and almost nobody but local farmworkers leading cows to graze, or haymaking with their scythes.

In an act of *ibsenesque* grandeur, a retired engineering teacher from Sofia has spent five years building a house in Gela, high in the mountains: polished concrete floors, white furnishings and copper bathroom fittings. Villa Gella is almost as large as the disused old state hotel in the distance but heralds a new era of capitalism and tourism. As soon as I heard about it, I wanted to visit.

The nearest airport is in Plovdiv, about a two-hour drive away. We flew from Stansted, where we witnessed a peeling off of holidaymakers. Those in panama hats or flowery dresses, reading Edmund de Waal, tended to head for

Sarah Sands swapped the usual summer destinations for a villa deep in the mountains of Bulgaria. Her spirit of adventure was rewarded with stunning scenery, healthy walks and some excellent food and wine

the flights to Florence. Our plane was packed with Bulgarians. And true to the stereotype, some of the men really did look like weightlifters.

Bulgaria has not fully shaken off the legacy of communism and many of the towns we passed were scarred with utilitarian concrete, the shops looked dreary and basic tourist civilities were not observed.

There is the Black Sea if you want it but the greater aesthetic appeal of Bulgaria is its mountainous regions, where abundant, natural diversity is protected by law and the traditional look of 19th-century, cobbled village centres is now preserved by building regulations.

The village of Gela is about 1,500m above sea level and is as clear and pure as you would wish. Villa Gella is even higher, commanding the best views of the region, across forest and mountain in every direction. The air is medicinally clean. If you have Heidi fantasies, this is the place for you. The main contrast with Switzerland is that Bulgaria is emptier and far, far cheaper. At a decent little taverna, in a picturesque village near the Greek border, we ordered salads and soft drinks for five people. The bill was £12.

The purpose of Villa Gella is to mix metropolitan luxury with untouched nature. It takes a bit of getting used to. It is the grandest house for miles, surrounded mostly by rural shacks.

The villa has the advantage over other holiday destinations of being attractive in all seasons. Gela is blazingly hot (30 degrees centigrade upwards) in summer, pleasantly mild in spring and autumn and perfect for skiers in winter. The rooms have huge fireplaces and a supply of logs to please even hardened survivalists. Because of its cross-seasonal appeal, the pool is indoors, the only drawback for summer guests.

The manager, Darina, is the niece of the owners, an intelligent, humorous woman who had studied luxury hotels round Europe and a wealth of interior design magazines to sharpen her understanding of contemporary taste and fashion.

The meals, of many courses, mix Bulgarian specialities such as *banitsa* (a pastry filled with egg and local cheese) or *sarmi* (pork and beef mince wrapped in cabbage) with plainer, delicious local produce. Fresh trout from the river, wild strawberries or mushrooms from the mountains. You can, of course, choose to cook.

Bulgaria's most famous export is probably its wines. Here it has beaten its neighbours hands down. There are some fabulous award-winning vintages that are worth a try.

We drank many wonderfully soft and fruity wines from the newish Terra Tangra winery in the Sakar mountain range, along the Maritsa river in the Thracian lowlands. The soil of granite and clay limestone with its effective drainage, the continental climate, ripeness of grapes and French barrels have produced classy reds – merlot, cabernet sauvignon, syrah – and fine whites; chardonnay, semillon, sauvignon blanc, traminer. I particularly recommend Terra Tangra single barrel.

Villa Gella has six very large en suite bedrooms. It would work for a family, or for a group of couples. This is not Ibiza, and some teenagers may find the lack of social life or even a television oppressive. I took three, and they were very happily left to their own devices. They blogged on their computers, listened to music on iPods, mucked about, loved the formal dinners and led us in charades on the terrace afterwards.

On the final evening, Darina arranged for a local folk singer and bagpipers to

perform. They were a huge success and rather generous in their praise of the dances we attempted. It was cheering to see teenagers looking so healthy after a week in the mountains and leaping up and down to Bulgarian music as if it were Lady Gaga.

Knowing that the young were happy enough to "chill" on the terrace with each other during the day, my husband and I set off for hikes along the mountain path. These were joyful excursions, witnessed by an astonishing array of butterflies, pretty cows with cowbells, grazing rich meadow flowers and, one morning, a large tortoise meandering across the road. And always, there were the views.

It is tempting to stay in the mountains but they are worth leaving for the caves, the most atmospheric of which is the Devil's Throat, 45 minutes away. This is the setting for the Orpheus myth, and is the most convincing location for Hades that I can think of.

So give Bulgaria a break. It has outstanding scenery, decent people, and it's trying hard to be a mainstream tourist destination. For once, be proud to be in Plovdiv.

DETAILS: BULGARIA

Original Travel has seven nights at Villa Gella from £9,999 half-board (up to 12 adults) including services of a chef, return flights on Ryanair to Plovdiv and seven days' car hire.
 ■ originaltravel.com