

Bulgaria's little piece of heaven

Up and under: (from top) the village of Gella in the Rhodope mountains; Villa Gella; interior of the villa; the Devil's Throat ALAMY

TRAVEL ESSENTIALS

GETTING THERE

Philip Norman travelled as a guest of easyJet, which flies to Sofia from Gatwick and Manchester. Alternatives are British Airways (0844 493 0787; ba.com) from Heathrow and Bulgaria Air (020-7637 7637; bulgaria-air.co.uk) from Heathrow. The nearest airport is Plovdiv, served by Ryanair (0871 246 0000; ryanair.com) from Stansted.

STAYING THERE

A seven-night stay at Villa Gella (sleeps 12), with half-board and a private chef, costs £600pp. For bookings and information, see villagella.com

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and quiet. As far as its owners know, it is the only such establishment in Bulgaria.

Villa Gella's setting is glorious, with nothing to be seen on every side but blueish crags and regiments of giant, ramrod-backed firs. The hamlet below is a microcosm of eastern Europe's chronic "youth-drain"; once a thriving community of 3,000, now reduced to just 30, with no services whatever unless you count hand-chopped wood. The villa consequently has to be self-sufficient, making butter, cheese and yoghurt from its own cows, cultivating honey from its own bees, producing wines from its Terra Tangra vineyard, including a pale amber rosé that competes with Provence's best. To the energetic it offers a wide range of activities such as hiking, horseback-riding and

cave-exploring; there's easy access both to the Black Sea coast and to ski-resorts such as Pamporovo and Chepelare. For those who prefer to chill out, the villa has an indoor pool and steam room, and on-site sports that will eventually include tennis, basketball, boules and Canadian horseshoe-pitching.

All the cooking is done by a wonderful woman named Dimka, who originally trained as a biochemist and could, if she wanted, become Bulgaria's favourite celebrity chef. Finicky eater though I am, I ate every morsel of Dimka's moussaka (which I had misguidedly thought a Greek national dish); her tarator, cold cucumber and yoghurt soup, and melt-in-the-mouth fried zucchini.

I also discovered the Bulgarian habit of starting breakfast or lunch by drinking a pick-me-up from a miniature cafe, rather like one of Jeeves's "bracers" in PG Wodehouse. There's apple vinegar, for instance, to combat hangovers, and fermented cabbage juice to rebalance the body's elements. The latter happened anyway, after a night's sleep in what Villa Gella's owners call "the luxury of silence", and then a hike to the foothills of Mount Orpheus through meadows full of purple and cream wild orchids, stopping at a wood-porch Greek Orthodox chapel to look at sumptuous frescoes and light a candle for a friend who died last summer and whom I miss terribly.

The day before, I'd looked into the jaws of hell, but that day, I felt very near to heaven.

Hidden in the Rhodope mountains lies the village of Gella, the perfect place for a luxury retreat. But visitors beware: the Devil's Throat, a vast and scary cavern, lies nearby, says **Philip Norman**

be, Euridice, was fatally bitten by a serpent on their wedding day, he ventured into the Underworld to play his lute to its presiding deities, Hades and Persephone, and so charm them into giving Euridice back to him. If you take the icy 500ft passage down into Diavolsko Garlo, you are retracing Orpheus's sandal-steps.

What waits below is by some way – and including Heathrow passport-control – the scariest place I've ever seen. The so-called "Hall of Thunder" is a vast twilight cavern that owes its name to the 140ft waterfall from the Trigrad River pounding down outside its roof.

Its floor is a labyrinth of underground cataracts, rapids and lakes from which no would-be-explorer has ever returned alive. Teeth-chattering tourists aside, the only inhabitants are bats, trout that have gone blind over the sunless centuries, and – it's said – the Nephilim, or fallen angels, cast out of Heaven for having sex with mortals. Hundreds of glimmering lights somehow only intensify the spray-flecked gloom; as one descends the wet rocks and slippery wooden stairs, one might be right behind a Thracian lute-player or in front of a banished angel.

Half-way down, a flight of 288 steps ascends like a ladder through the dark vault and out to the Trigrad falls. Britain's health and safety zealots wouldn't know where to begin.

The story goes that Orpheus reclaimed Euridice by promising not to look at her during their return from the Underworld. But on the



climb through the Devil's Throat, the thunder of the falls drowned her footfall; he turned to check that she was still behind him, and so lost her forever. A tiny spring bubbling out of the rock wall symbolises his remorseful tears.

There is – bear with me – a certain analogy between the Orpheus legend and Bulgaria as a holiday destination. In the 40-odd years since the Communist bloc countries opened up to European tourists, it has been entirely identified with cheap package tours, centred on its Black Sea coastal resorts such as Bourgas and Varna, with areas of extraordinary beauty and fascination such as the Rhodope Mountains left unexploited.

While Greece and Turkey developed their tourist markets, Bulgaria has remained stuck in a netherworld of beer, chips and some of the most gruesome souvenir dolls on the planet. A latter-day Orpheus is needed to lead it upmarket without a backward glance.

A first step, at least, has now been taken in Gella, a tiny hamlet deep in the Rhodope – overlooked, suitably enough, by Mount Orpheus. It is a villa accommodating up to 12 people (plus three children), offering the same level of luxury and sophistication as, say, La Residencia on Mallorca, with the added bonus of stunning mountain scenery and (if you don't bring the three children) absolute peace

It may seem like part of every modern traveller's lot, especially at Heathrow passport control, but this summer I had a genuine glimpse into the jaws of Hell. As all good travel articles say, here's how to get there.

First, go to Bulgaria's Rhodope mountains, 150 miles south-east of its capital, Sofia. Then follow one of the roads carved through canyons of sheer rock and fir forest, still haunted by bears and wolves: past tumbling rivers and stone bridges dating back to Roman times; past brown-and-white chalet houses, trout farms and trucks left over from the Communist era, some still used to haul livestock or logs, others atrophied like the ideology they once served.

About a mile on from the village of Trigrad you come to a rock wall with a small door, above which a misleadingly homely wooden sign reads "Diavolsko Garlo": the Devil's Throat. Opening the door releases an icy blast that turns back many a summer-clad visitor there and then; for this particular portal into Hell is not fiery but freezing.

Bulgaria, like its neighbours Greece, Turkey and Romania, was once the land of the Thracians, a rival civilisation to ancient Rome and Troy. The two greatest heroes of Thrace – half-real, half-myth – were Spartacus and Orpheus. The first was a warrior, later portrayed by Kirk Douglas; the second was a musician of bewitching beauty and charisma, somewhat like a prototype Mick Jagger. According to legend, when Orpheus's bride-to-