

When Blur bassist **Alex James** took his family to Bulgaria, there really was only one place he could stay...

ALMOST everyone I mentioned it to looked at me with disbelief and said: 'Bulgaria? Why?' Well, I told them, Bulgaria had the most important Wemble named after it and reached the semi-finals of the World Cup in 1994... it was the home of the Thracians, a parallel civilisation to the ancient Greeks... and it has been shaped by many great empires - Roman, Greek, Turkish and Arabic, not to mention communism.

What's more, the place where we were to stay, Gela, is said to have been the birthplace of Orpheus, the mythical musician and poet. So we were expecting great things as we flew to Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second city, where we stopped for lunch. From the moment aubergine hit the table I knew we were in for a good week. We were in a little leafy courtyard in a no-name restaurant off a tiny street in the ancient quarter - ancient meaning there is an amphitheatre where gladiators used to fight.

I pointed at a few things on the menu and it was as if someone had turned on a tap that dispensed food. It just kept on coming: rich soups, fried cheeses, colourful salads and barbecued meats. It was one of the best meals I've eaten all year.

We walked it off on cobbled streets in sizzling sunshine before resuming our journey. Plovdiv is only an hour from the Mediterranean, but instead of heading towards the sea we drove up into the hills, winding through pine forests into the Rhodope mountains, stopping at an ancient monastery where they make rather good beer. There was food every-

A very big house in the country

where - jars of fruit in honey, pickled chillis and interesting-looking beans lined the roadsides.

Road signs pointed to Turkey but we kept on climbing into the clouds alongside mountain streams. Gela is 6,000ft up and we had to skalom around landslides for the last few perilously steep miles.

The house we would be staying in was in perfect order. It had all the trimmings: two Jacuzzis, a pool, ultra-slick suspended fireplaces and polished concrete alongside ancient beehives and farm implements. It was called Villa Gela and was unique, with every detail a pains-

taking labour of love. The Bulgarian businessman who owns it hauled designer luxury up the mountain one lampshade at a time and staffed the place to the nines.

Even the shed made from tin and planks next door looked good. The mountainside location provided a frame that blessed and beautified everything placed in it: a vast and pretty wilderness. How could I have not known about all this, I wondered, as I nibbled nuts on the terrace in the exact centre of an endless, perfect calm.

We'd been advised to 'pack for Scotland' as there can be six or seven kinds of weather every day, but we woke on the first morning to sunshine and wisps of mist in the plunging valleys below.

I'D HAVE been quite happy to stay at Villa Gela having bubble baths and drinking in the view, but when the children heard the ski season had been extended by a month, they were desperate to try it.

The snow was a bit higher up the mountain but 20 minutes after setting out from the villa, we'd got there, hired all the gear - for next to nothing - and the boys and I were having a lesson, to the sound of europop bang-banging from a sound system in the background.

We were having a good time in perfect weather, but it's never guaranteed here. Annually, temperatures range from -20C to +40C. That and the mountainous terrain means vehicles in this part of the world are quite interesting. I didn't see two the same all week. The agricultural ones were the best: things made from lawnmower engines bolted to chassis with no electric; Second World War vehicles; trucks made almost entirely from wood and pimped up by their owners. I even saw a Trabant, one of those old Eastern Bloc numbers made from compressed cardboard.

Although the country is part of the EU, the people are poor and they still use horses to plough the fields. On the mountain the wind rose. There were rumbles of thunder like someone falling out of bed upstairs. Skiing was off the next day so we decided to go swimming - spas are a good family day out. The wind and rain drove hard



BIG HIT: The Villa Gela where Alex stayed and, below, its pool area

GETTING THERE Original Travel (020 7578 7333, originaltravel.co.uk) offers the exclusive hire of Villa Gela from £641 per person, per week, based on 12 people sharing. Price includes half board with chef, some wines and transfers. Flights from the UK start from £120. For further information on Villa Gela, visit villegela.com.



and the spa was brimming with mineral water. But it was just off season and we had the place to ourselves - a whole enormous, state-of-the-art health resort, with its endless swimming pools, plunge pools, steamers and saunas. And it was cheap - but excellent.

After all that, we needed to eat and I was starting to learn that ordering food is a pleasant thing in Bulgaria. I criticised the children for ordering spag bol but it was remarkable. The Bulgarians spend 80 to 90 per cent of their income on food so they care about it. Sauces are made with rich stocks - even ordinary-sounding things such as bean soup were a delight.

Feeling healthy, I went for smoked fish and the butcher's plate. The four kinds of fish came with creamed horseradish and

tiny pickled onions and there were piquant sausages of pork and salted beef fillets. It was one of the best days I've spent with my family. Back at base we collapsed in front of Ice Age 3 and all fell asleep together after tea. And that is what being on holiday is all about.

Every time I looked out of every window, there was a different view. Next day it was raining again, but differently. We drove through gorges for an hour and a half to a tiny place that had a small sign for a footpath to Gela - where we'd come from. On foot it was only a few miles back over the mountain. The kids all wanted to walk back but we drove off in the other direction looking for lunch.

We warmed up in an empty log cabin-type place with an open



VAST WILDERNESS: The impressive Rhodope mountains. Left: Alex enjoying a glass of the excellent local red



fire burning and comfy sofas. It stopped raining and the children played in a hand-made wooden swing park, threw things in the river and clapped up and down the road on a horse on a rein before lunch at an organic trout farm and spa.

We even enjoyed a taste of Bulgaria's famous folk music. A bagpipe man and blue-eyed siren straight off the cover of National Geographic came to our house and rocked up and down a blues scale. The kids were mesmerised; I got goose bumps.

As dark descended, we set off Chinese lanterns and watched them flail into the mists below. We did lots of things but, really, little boys are content just being in mountains. Running up and down steep hills and finding enormous snails kept them happy all day long: that and the idea of the bears that still exist here - their

tracks had been seen at the end of the villa's drive at Christmas.

The food served at the house was some of the best and most interesting I've ever eaten. We had milk, warm from the cow nest door; olive oil from over the road; herbs and wild honey all gathered by hand. The wine was a revelation. The one we quaffed on a regular basis had apparently been judged one of the best 50 in the world. I didn't eat one thing that wasn't delicious all week. In fact, now I have my own personal bulge-area.

What a show: incredibly cheap, amazing ancient history, beautiful scenery, and nice people. It's somewhere else altogether. **● The Big Feastival with Alex James, presented by Jamie Oliver, takes place at Alex's farm in Oxfordshire on September 1 and 2. Tickets at thebigfeastival.com.**

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has been discounted by £900 for departures on November 30. Accommodation is aboard the yacht Georgina, with prices starting from £2,695 including flights, two nights' bed-and-breakfast in Havana, transfers, six nights' full board on the boat, plus all fishing with guide. For further information, call 020 8742 1566 or email info@golfingworldwide.co.uk.

BARGAIN BEST LUXURY SAIL around the British Virgin Islands aboard a fully crewed yacht with Drake Academy (020 7117 6375, drakeacademy.co.uk/holidays). Departures on August 10 have been discounted by 50 per cent and prices now start from £1,249 for seven nights' all-inclusive with complimentary bar. The price

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at thatched Mill Cottage in the Dartmoor village of Sticklepath during August from £514, saving 25 per cent. The Grade II listed cottage sleeps four and has an inglenook fireplace and private south-facing patio. Call 01647 434063 or visit www.helpfulholidays.com, searching reference A163.

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