

Sainsbury's

Our first interactive issue! 

magazine

OCTOBER 2012

**ONLY
£1.60**
+WIN meals
at our favourite
restaurants

Let's get cooking!

- * Soups and pies
- * Cakes and crumbles
- * Roasts and bakes

+FREE

Herb plants for every reader*

INSIDE!

**VIDEO
RECIPES**

Amazing
step-by-step
guides from
top chefs



*Beetroot soup with crème
fraîche and feta toasts*
page 119



97+

**INSPIRING REASONS
TO LOVE AUTUMN**

**MORE ENERGY
GLOWING SKIN
BETTER BODY**
Three feel-good
gurus make it easy



Wear...
Autumn's
must-have
£30 jacket



Try...
Classic Chinese
recipes with
Ken and Ching



Buy...
The latest
skincare
superheroes



We Brits have long embraced the Eastern-European city break, but the majority of us have been slower to explore further afield. Take Bulgaria for instance: you've got the vibrant capital of Sofia, with its onion-domed churches jostling for space with shiny shopping malls. And then there are the long sandy beaches on the Black Sea and the lushly forested mountainous interior, which is where you'll find Villa Gella. Sitting proudly on top of the Rhodope Mountains, this family-run villa offers a unique escape with the warmest of welcomes for up to 12 people.

What's it like? After snaking our way up 1,700 metres of winding mountain roads, we arrived in the sleepy hamlet of Gela, which overlooks mountains and valleys. Inside the villa it's a fusion of sleek, contemporary interior design – with plenty of polished concrete and glass to let the light flood in – and homely touches, such as plumped cushions.

What's for supper? All the food is prepared by the villa's own chef and you're guaranteed a real taste of traditional Bulgarian fare. We enjoyed a platter of local meats and cheeses before taking our seats for dinner. A typical meal starts with *shopska* (shepherd's) salad – a combination of chopped tomatoes, cucumber, green pepper, onion and grated sheep's cheese, served with freshly baked

A little place we know

Villa Gella Bulgaria

GOOD TO KNOW

In Bulgaria, a nod means 'no' and a shake of the head 'yes'

bread – followed by peppers stuffed with meat, rice and herbs, then a sweet pumpkin and filo pastry dessert, all washed down with a selection of award-winning regional wines.

Bedtime There are six bedrooms, each with its own individual style. The Oriental suite, which is a family room, even has a private covered balcony, complete with Jacuzzi. Each room has an en-suite bathroom, log fire and enormous, sumptuous bed.

Hanging out There are lots of places to relax, including a library with plenty of reading materials, wi-fi access, TV and poker table. But the highlight is the

spa, with a steam room, swimming pool, small gym, and garden terrace – an ideal spot for sunbathing in summer, when the temperature can soar to 30°C.

Nearby There are plenty of places to explore. We drove through deep gorges and dramatic river valleys, took in picturesque countryside on horseback (£12-13 for a one-hour trek; arkantours.com) and braved the 301 narrow steps down into the Devil's Throat cave, which in mythology led Orpheus to the underworld. Shiroka Laka, a quaint village, is worth a visit for its famous school of folk music. Try to catch a bagpipe show – the music is truly haunting. Whether you fly into Sofia or Plovdiv, both are cultural hotspots with plenty of history and spectacular architecture. Or visit during winter and ski in the nearby resort of Pamporovo, the second largest in Bulgaria.

Who'd love it? Friends and family groups who want to get away from it all and immerse themselves in a different culture. It's a far cry from the usual villa rental, and few could deny the rejuvenating effect of the mountain air and superb hospitality.

HOW TO BOOK Seven nights half board at Villa Gella cost from £600 each, based on 12 sharing (villagella.com). To book, contact Marina Gratsos at Carpe Diem Luxury Travel (020 7402 5330; carpe-diem-travel.com). Fly from Heathrow to Sofia with British Airways (britishairways.com) or Stansted to Plovdiv with Ryan Air (ryanair.com).

Rooms with views, clockwise from top left: each bedroom has a log fire; the stunning view from the villa; exploring the countryside on horseback; relax in the living area

TAKE HOME

Rose oil, and honey infused with mountain herbs