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Tory voters fear next election is already lost

Big majority believe Labour will be in power

Michael Savage, Rachel Sylvester
Alice Thomson

Just seven per cent of Tories believe that David Cameron will win an overall majority at the next election, a poll has revealed.

Three quarters believe that Labour will be in office after May 2015, either alone or in coalition with the Liberal Democrats. A mere eight per cent envisage a second coalition between Tories and Lib Dems, according to a canvass of Tory members seen by *The Times*.

The poll came as one of the Prime Minister's closest allies lambasted the party's disastrous by-election campaign in Eastleigh, where the Tories finished third behind the UK Independence Party. Nick Boles, the Planning Minister, said that he had been "thoroughly p****d off" by the "truly rotten campaign". He said it proved that any attempt to pull the Tories to the right would end in electoral disaster.

"Where was the hope? It was as if modernisation had never happened," he said. "We screwed it up. We didn't even screw up in a new way. We screwed up in an old way that we have been doing for a decade. It's so frustrating."

In an attempt to stem talk of a Tory leadership challenge, Mr Boles told *The Times* that anyone wanting to

topple Mr Cameron before the next election needed "their head seeing to".

The Tory soul-searching came as poor construction figures added to concern over a "triple dip" recession. The Prime Minister was further rebuked yesterday by the independent Office of Budget Responsibility over his claim that the Government's austerity drive had not hit economic growth.

Grumblings about Mr Cameron's leadership have been growing among MPs. Concerns were voiced at a dinner of the Thatcherite No Turning Back group of Tory MPs last week.

"The overwhelming majority of my fellow MPs understand that David Cameron's leadership and a record of governing responsibly offers us the best chance of persuading the voters to give us an overall majority in 2015," Mr Boles said. "But a few malcontents — most of them sitting on big majorities — seem willing to risk letting Labour back in by indulging their ideological obsessions. I just wish they would listen to those MPs elected in 2010 in very marginal seats who want them to shut up."

The infighting has been accompanied by a collapse in confidence among party members at Tory electoral prospects. The poll of 1,844 Tory members Continued on page 4, col 1
Nick Boles interview, pages 38, 39



Chris Huhne, who will be sentenced on Monday, will face prison bullying "no worse than you can expect on Question Time", the disgraced Tory Jonathan Aitken said. News, page 6

Huhne takes cover as storm clouds close in

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Europe

The secret side to Bulgaria

Think that Bulgaria is all cheap skiing and coastal bling?

Jane Knight explores a country steeped in history

The words of the border guard have stayed with me for more than two decades: "No visa, no Bulgaria!" And with that, my intrepid friends and I — intent only on reaching Istanbul via Bulgaria — were herded off the train onto the station platform to spend an uncomfortable night before being whisked out of the country we had so briefly entered.

Since then, nothing has tempted me back to Bulgaria. The country may have escaped its Communist past and the European Union expanded eastwards, but Bulgaria's main claim to tourism fame is its cheap ski destinations and a smattering of coastal bling — the Essex girl of Europe.

So I was surprised to hear of Villa Gella, a stunning upmarket mountain retreat supposedly perfect for families and large group gatherings but significantly less expensive than its Alpine counterparts — luxury for £600pp a week.

We arrive among a plane-load of clapping Bulgarians evidently amazed at our safe landing in a country charmingly untouched by tourism, where bell-clanging goats and sheep seem to outnumber the locals in the scenic Thracian Rhodope mountains that will be our base.

But before getting there, we break the two-hour journey from Plovdiv

“Who would have thought that Bulgarian wine could have tasted this good. Both fruity and silky

with a visit to the 11th-century Bachkovo monastery, a Unesco World Heritage site and one of the largest and oldest Eastern Orthodox monasteries in Europe. Over-shadowed by grey, craggy rocks, this monastery houses beautiful frescoes, although the bursts of reds and golds in the domed ceiling are heavily peppered in soot from centuries of candle-lighting. Even the famous icon of the Virgin Mary, said to work miracles, has only drawn a handful of worshippers who wait to kiss the statue.

It's not just ancient Greece which can trace its roots back to the dawn of history; centuries before the monastery was built, inhabitants from Bulgaria's Thracian valley fought in the Trojan wars. At the Devil's Throat caves we are reminded of the region's classical history — the caves are the supposed site where Orpheus journeyed down to Hades to rescue Eurydice. Legend has it that he broke the condition of her freedom by turning around before he reached daylight, and when she disappeared, his tears fell to create a thundering 42m indoor waterfall.

They aren't the only limestone caves in the area; among a labyrinth of underground caverns and passages, we visit Yagodinska, with its New Year's Hall complete with Christmas tree and not only the normal stalactites and stalagmites but also leopard skin — coloured and dimpled rock — and "pearls" left from rock sediment dripped down over the centuries.

At the nearby town of Devin, we stop at the peculiar, modern but almost completely empty Orpheus Hotel Spa and Resort to sample traditional Bulgarian fare: patatnik — pancake with potatoes, eggs and feta; shapsky — feta cheese baked with peppers, tomatoes and eggs; and banitsa — filo pastry with feta and egg.

It is good but doesn't come close to the delicious meals we feast on at Villa Gella itself, where Bulgarian specialities are mixed with the freshest of local produce — even the apple juice is freshly squeezed from the orchard. And who would have thought Bulgarian wine could have tasted this good; both deliciously fruity and silky. The Terra Tangra label which features on a range of vintages we sample comes from Villa Gella's own vineyards along the Maritsa river in the Thracian lowlands.

It shouldn't be a surprise; it turns out that Villa Gella, run by a retired engineering teacher from Sofia and his wife, who spent five years building it more than 2,000m up in the Rhodope mountains, offers excellence in almost every aspect of our stay.

The first thing you notice are the breathtaking views from the enormous windows in every room over the conifer-clad slopes, where morning mists swirl around the valley. Even the indoor pool looks out onto this spectacular scenery. The windows

Bachkovo Monastery and, inset, Villa Gella in the Rhodope Mountains



may give the villa a stark, look from the outside — not helped by the fact that its closest neighbours are rustic shacks — but clearly it was built for looking from the inside out.

What an inside though, all shabby chic with stone floors, and furnishings in creams and wood. It is presided over by Darina, the manager and niece of the owners, who speaks fluent English and has contacts everywhere. One night she arranges for local musicians to visit, and, perhaps helped by the wine, we forget our inhibitions and dance to music from Gaida skin bagpipes, one of the oldest instruments in the world.

Bagpipes are big in this part of the world — just 15 minutes' walk through picture-postcard views we come to the site of Gella's famous bagpipe festival in August, when players from around the world bring the hills alive to their own music.

For now, the only sound is the clanging of goat and sheep bells as we approach a


tiny chapel. Inside is Nicola Beevski, 40, who Darina has arranged to meet us there. His story is mesmerising and tells of a time 23 years ago, when illness meant he was discharged from the army. Then, out on a walk, he paused at the doorway of the chapel where we are standing, hanging on his every word: "I felt some kind of push and I found myself in front of the icons," he said. "A voice said I was chosen for God and it told me to take the icons home to clean. At 3am I woke up and felt the desire to start painting an icon. I started to make a frame and used the bed sheet for a canvas, painted it and fell asleep. I had never painted before then. My talent was unlocked." Now his icons are everywhere in the tiny chapel, a stunning modern-day equivalent to the monastic frescoes we saw earlier.

So there you have it — there are miracles in the stunning Rhodope hills, not least of which is an improbably luxurious villa, which you have to see to believe. Bulgaria is definitely worth another look.

Need to know

Jane Knight was a guest of Villa Gella (villagella.com), which can be rented for up to 12 people for £7,200 a week, half-board and including the services of a chef. For bookings, contact Firefly Collection (020-3432 7784, firefly-collection.com). Rooms can be booked independently from £600 half-board (based on two people sharing), but the villa needs a minimum of three rooms taken in any week to operate.





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