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**MiBansko,**

*By Sandra McCunis, ATC*



Bansko was a memorable experience for 44 adventurous SCSC participants that helped comprise the TSC Expedition trip with 150 plus skiers. TC, **Brenda Soileau** and four other participants went on the pre-trip to Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria. ATC, **Sandra McCunis** and the remaining participants left Houston for Bansko on January 26, 2008.

The TSC Welcome Ceremony began with us displaying our SCSC banner as we marched in a parade into the Main Square. We were greeted by the Mayor of Bansko and the Bulgarians entertained us with their local folk dances and music. Thousands of locals, perhaps one quarter of the town population came to the celebration.

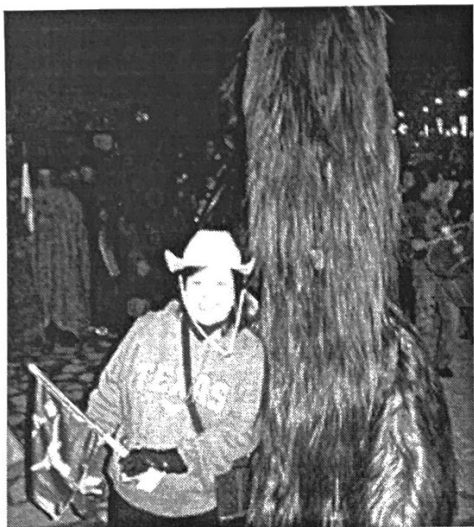
We were treated to a feast of Bulgarian food and hot gluhwein. This event, which was announced in their local news, marked the first time in history that an organized group of American tourists traveled to Bansko and joined in a celebration with the Bulgarians.



At the welcome ceremony, the locals invited us to join them in their folk dances. While **Vicki Faulkner** participated, **Allan Simpson** stood watching on the sidelines. Allan, swaying to the music, was approached

by not one, but two different Bulgarian fellows asking him to dance. It must be that you look like a player, Allan!

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Suzan Miles thought her husband **Van Miles** looked very handsome in the black felt western hat he wore to the Welcome Ceremony. An older man approached him and asked if he could have the western hat in exchange for his old baseball cap with Banskó written on it. Van, without hesitation, gave the man his hat. The happiness on the man's face was priceless and Suzan was proud that her husband did something to help secure positive international relations between the Americans and the Bulgarians.

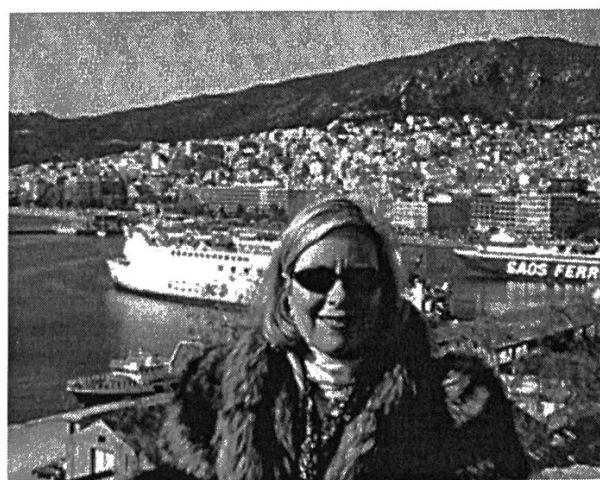
There was an excursion on Tuesday to the ruins of the ancient Macedonian city of Philippi. **Sarah Granbery, Stan Broniak, Pam Smith, Marsha Lutz, David Eichoff**, Tom Huzzey and **Luz Marquez** were among those that explored the remains of two early Christian basilicas, the grand Roman forum, the acropolis, and the theatre. The tour continued to Kavala, one of the most picturesque towns in Greece, rising from the beautiful harbor up to a huge Byzantine fortress. After a walking tour of the city, **Darrell Kohler, Opal Kohler, Jeff Hanrahan** and **Sandra McCunis** sat at a sidewalk cafe and ate traditional Greek salads and sipped on Ouzo.

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On Tuesday evening, **Brenda Soileau** invited the group to her suite for a Happy Hour so that we could drink the bottles of wine given to us by the Pirin Hotel. Among those at the party were **Ross Baker, Diane Baker, Tor Lileng, Gloria Lopez, Robert Reidenbach, Paula Gilmore** and

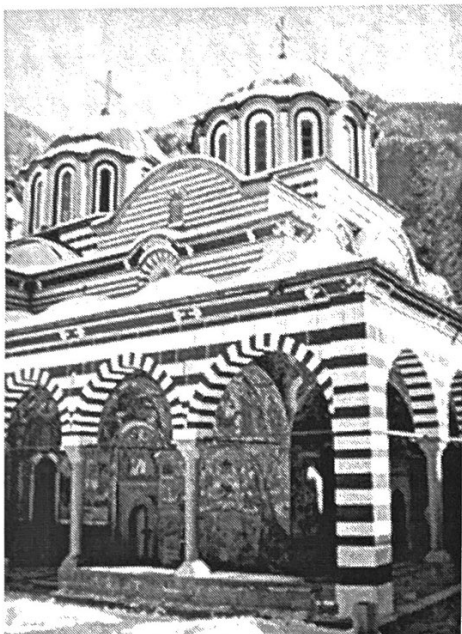
**miBansko, Ian Yovanovic**. As we drank the wine, the group shared jokes that are not suitable for publication in the Sitzmarke!

Everyone laughed and had a great time until the hotel management



complained that we were too noisy and were disturbing other guests. A few people continued the party at the hotel bar.

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Our excursion on Wednesday was to the Rila Monastery, a UNESCO World Heritage site. Founded in the 10th century, it is regarded as one of Bulgaria's most important cultural, historical and architectural monuments.

**Marsha Kilgore, Marianne Pearce, Millie Jude, Takemi Koike, Christie Burke and Margaret Walker** were among those that visited the monastery. After the tour, we enjoyed a Bulgarian lunch in their restaurant.

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The nightlife in Bansko is an interesting combination of traditional bars "mehanas" and modern nightclubs and disco's. On Wednesday evening, **Jose Araujo, Holly Luong, Caroline Vetterling, Sandy Perry, Ray Villarreal, Bernie Clinton and Christina Anderson** were among those who danced the night away at "Party Place". They played a great mix of American dance music including the "Macarena" and the "Cotton-Eyed Joe". Some of the Bulgarians joined our group and tried to dance like us.



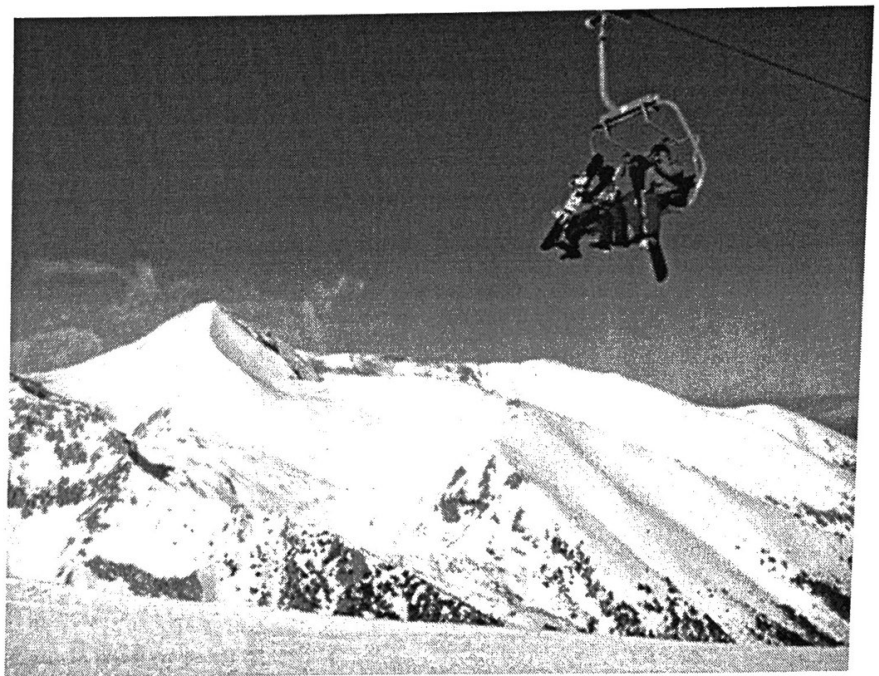
One of the highlights of our trip was our group party on Thursday evening at a restaurant in a three hundred year old building in the old section

and vegetables on large wooden platters was served by waiters dressed in traditional Bulgarian attire. We sipped on brandy, drank wine and danced to live Bulgarian music.

**Robert Viktorin, Carol Viktorin, Marilyn Swanson, Larry Robinson, Cindy Van Pelt, Brett Littell, Cathey Littell and Sue Bean Gillian** were among those that enjoyed this festive evening.

Friday's excursion was to Melnik, the smallest town in Bulgaria. It's history dates back to medieval times and it is known for its wines. A group of 24 participants enjoyed Bulgarian cuisine and sampling the typical Melnik wines. Wine tasting always seems to be a popular activity for the SCSC group!

The skiers enjoyed a great week in Bansko. The mountain featured a variety of interesting terrain with a 5200 vertical drop and a 10 mile run. Sarah and Luz were enjoying the scenery while riding up the gondola when Sarah was mooned by two young men in a car going down the gondola. It appears that Sarah saw a little more scenery than she expected!



The hotel staff at the Hotel Pirin were very nice and friendly, but verbal communication was somewhat difficult. Allan failed to use a language understood by the pretty front desk clerk in his request for more toilet paper. He relied on a somewhat graphic, yet universal gesture to successfully procure the items. Throughout the week they continued to exchange amusing smiles, even when they encountered each other away the hotel. It makes you wonder what she was thinking when she smiled at Allan!

On Saturday, our last night in



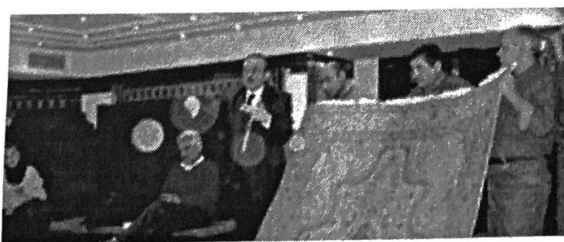
Bansko, some of the participants met in Brenda's suite to mingle and drink their remaining liquor. It would be a shame to waste good liquor! When the liquor was gone, a group moved to the bar in the hotel lobby. A tired group said goodnight around midnight after Gloria fell asleep in Bernie's lap and Tor fell asleep sitting on the couch.

After a great week in Bansko, the group prepared for their departure on Sunday. One group led by **Sandy Perry** boarded the first bus to the Sofia airport for their return to Houston with an overnight stay in Paris. The remaining 27 participants boarded a second bus to Sofia to catch a flight on Turkish Air for the post-trip to Istanbul.

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Istanbul was a fascinating place to visit. Our first day included a guided tour of the city which began in the Sultanahmet district, the heart of old Istanbul. We visited the Blue Mosque, dating from the 17th century and the Basilica Cistern founded in the Byzantine Empire. The tour continued with a visit to the Topkapi Palace, the residence of the Ottoman Sultans from the 15th to the 19th century. Ross, Diane, Stan and Pam visited The Harem, the private quarters where the Sultans and their families lived.

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The tour ended with a presentation on Persian rugs at the Grand Bazaar. When Sandra admired a rug, a salesman approached her wanting to know her budget for a rug. Although she told him she didn't have a budget for a rug, he

persisted and followed her down three flights of stairs trying to sell her a rug. However, Marsha Lutz, after looking at numerous rugs, did decide to purchase two fabulous rugs for her home.

On Monday night, some of the participants decided to experience having a Turkish Bath. Jose had secretly planned a trip to the bath with six women, until Bernie, David and Ray joined in to spoil his fun. Better luck next time, Jose!



Our day began on Tuesday with a tour of the Hagia Sophia Museum



strait that divides Europe from Asia. After the cruise, there was a visit to the legendary Spice Bazaar. In the evening, Brenda, Sandra, Marsha, Takemi, Millie, Marianne, Cindy, David, Caroline, Jose and Holly went to Sultana's, a Turkish restaurant

for a dinner show with belly dancers. Marianne, Cindy and Holly were invited on the stage for a lesson in belly dancing. It was a very enjoyable evening with good food and great entertainment.



Our visit to Istanbul ended too quickly.



visit,  
it would have been nice to have had a longer stay. On Wednesday morning, we checked out of the Hotel Antik and headed to the Istanbul airport for our return flight to Houston. It was a long day of traveling, but we returned home with great memories. Bansko, Sofia and Istanbul were exciting new destinations for SCSC and places that should be considered for future trips.

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