



SPORTING MATTERS

BY PETER JACK

Green is the colour!

THE colour green is synonymous with our island and it was strangely ironic that our strongest national colour was integral to a trip I was on last week in Bulgaria.

Those of you who know their flags will be aware that the Bulgarian National flag is red, white and green. But green was the predominant colour, linking two very important aspects of our trip, it was the colour of the paint we used in the orphanage that we were there to help and it was the colour of the ski-run that I was eventually allowed on.

We were on a joint expedition from Limavady High School Youth Club and the Interact Club of Limavady. Interact is the junior branch of Rotary and I was with Darren Mornin, team leader, along with Nicole McMichael, youth club senior leader.

Darren had forged links with the Orphanage over five previous trips and knew of the progress being made there but we found when we got

there that things were changing. Bulgaria has been in the EU since 2007 but there was further integration on January 1 this year and as you know, the Daily Mail had warned us that there would be thousands of Bulgarians and Romanians camped out on our door steps with their begging bowls out.

Funnily enough, the expected invasion never arrived – in fact the invasion was reversed. There was a dozen from the Roe Valley arriving like a marauding hoard about to pillage and loot the slopes and shops of a ski resort, Pamporovo in Southern Western Bulgaria.

Nestling in the foot hills of the Rhodope mountains and only 80 kilometres away from the airport at Plovdiv, Pamporovo has been voted Europe's top ski resort for beginners and intermediate skiers. Never having been brave enough to don a set of skis before, I was in for a steep learning curve. I quickly learned that green was the beginner's slope. I thought it would be only a matter of time, however, before I progressed

through green, then blue, then red, then black, then 'The Wall'..... then probably a late bid for the Irish Winter Olympic ski team for Sochi where the world's biggest and coldest orgy of sport is about to begin this Friday.

GROUND RULES

Before any skiing or painting however, we had a meeting called by my fellow Rotarian, Darren Mornin about the ground rules for the week ahead. We were there to represent our schools and our country. Hearing the news from home, I reckoned we needed some fine ambassadors for our wee country....

The next morning we were up at 7.30 a.m. (which was 5.30 a.m. for our body clocks) to confront our first Bulgarian breakfast.

I am not the most confident of mountain bikers (probably because I have already broken a collar bone and some ribs on a few falls) but I reckoned that skiing would feel similar. It was all about balance and confidence. Fortunately, young Mark Jack and Amy Stewart and I would have the world's

most patient ski instructress, Radka (who lived in a nearby village and took a ski lift to work every day – beats most local commutes).

Meanwhile Darren 'Black Run' Mornin, along with Katie Love and Rachel Brolly zoomed off to the ski lift to get taken up to some far away slopes as Radka tried to explain to a gomey from Limavady how to actually put a pair of ski boots on, then get strapped into skis (practically a day's work in itself), then to actually try and walk in them.

Over the next few hours, Radka kept us on the kinder garden slopes before we would actually be allowed on the nursery slopes, and as for venturing out on to the mountain itself, that was a mere pipe dream. I gazed forlornly at the upper slopes, a forbidden zone, only to be visited by ski-ing gods. I found out about the joys of 'snow plough'. For most of us, a snow plough is something that keeps the Glenshane Pass open but for us novices, the 'snow plough' was a vital way of actually slowing down. Any

idiot can go fast on a set of skis – or a set of wheels for that matter – but getting stopped was a different skill entirely.

If I heard Radka say "Relax your arms Peter" once, she said it a thousand times. When I was being bad, she confiscated my skis as I was trying to use them to slow down. Amy and Mark, however, having the advantages of youth and talent, were showing great signs of progress while I felt like the pupil in the corner of the class room wearing the big 'D' hat.

All had enjoyed a great first day on the slopes before we headed off on our own bus to the sleepy village of Shiroka Luka, which clings to the side of a steep mountain, washed by a small river and looks across to densely wooded slopes on the opposite side, where a network of cobbled streets adds to the picturesque image. However, we weren't there to enjoy the scenery, we were there to work.

Darren and the High School had been visiting here and contributing to the orphanage for nearly a decade and Darren was able to see



PJ and MJ trying not to fall out of the ski lift. NCL06-27s

the vast improvements in the lives of the children with more spending and investment in the big imposing building.

THE DIRECTOR

We were then introduced to the Director by our local guide, Mr. Fix It himself, Emile. The Director welcomed us and the kids donned their Breaking Bad type onesies (I heard they were all the rage last week in Derry Court House) to protect themselves from splashes of green paint. Meanwhile the leaders popped round to the school next door where we met the Principal, a smiling hard working woman who agreed to let our team into a classroom later in the week so we could see a snapshot of the Bulgarian Education system in operation. Meanwhile in the orphanage, our youngsters were proudly painting corridor walls in a pleasant shade of green to freshen up the décor for the residents.

As the week went on, our team got more efficient with their rollers and their brushes and worked faster to ensure that the painting would be completed by the Thursday which left Friday free for a party with the orphans where goodie bags were handed over to the kids – and where a vast array of much needed items were handed over to the Director. The emphasis on the establishment is going to change from March of this year and it would no longer be called an 'Orphanage'. No such pejorative term would be allowed. Instead, in a new Orwellian World, orphans wouldn't exist – but parentless kids will still have to be rehoused in the same building where they would live in self-con-

tained units which we would help equip – everything from a TV to a DVD player to more prosaic items such as cups and saucers for each of the three units.

Our bus picked us up and took us back to our hotel. The morning work on the slopes had wrecked our legs, and the afternoon work in the orphanage had wrecked our arms as we manhandled paint rollers.

DAY TWO

Day two was more of the same work. Radka allowed us a little further down a slope but still a metaphorical mile away from the Elysian fields stretching out far above us. On day three we had a trip to Plovdiv (Bulgarians second biggest city as the guide explained to us) and we took in the local ethnographic museum, the Roman Amphitheatre which was only discovered 30 years ago and a view from the old ramparts of a Soviet era statue which had been allowed to remain even after the overthrow of the Soviet backed Bulgarian regime.

The next day Radka allowed us to ski down to the ski lift where we were transported on a magical ten minute journey to the top of the mountain. Seemingly now on top of the East Balkan World, the vistas were breathtaking. It finally clicked with me as to why people love a skiing holiday, and as the clouds disappeared as they would for the rest of our stay, we saw nothing but blue cloudless skies, a beaming sun and lots of snow and picture post card perfect conditions.

By the last day, I was able to glide a little and go downhill without

feeling I was on the verge of an impending catastrophe and even a skiing philistine like me could appreciate the beauty and serenity of the snow-capped peaks all around us as we frolicked above the clouds in a white clad version of Heaven.

By the end of the week, we had been on a Bulgarian Culture evening. We had thrown ourselves down a mountain side at night under artificial light on inflated tubes; we had been bowling; we had eventually been presented with our ski graduation certificates and we were left with nothing but gratitude for our local guides and a new found appreciation of how tough it can be for teachers and charity directors in under-resourced schools and orphanages.

We had improved our skiing abilities (Katie and Rachael came down a black slope on their last day) and we had improved the lives of kids in an institution, leaving a legacy of much-needed equipment and green painted walls.

The green, green grass of home awaited us at the end of the week but the green paint on my trousers would remind me in the future of a great week in Pamporovo, Bulgaria. Maybe the next time I would be allowed to graduate from the green slopes to blue. We had travelled from the land of Binevenagh Mountain to the land of the Rhodope mountains in one four hour flight and our young team had represented Limavady as fantastic ambassadors.

We took home smiles and sore legs but we left nothing but smiles and fond memories behind us....



Making new friends in the classroom. NCL06-29s



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Handing out the goodie bags. NCL06-28s



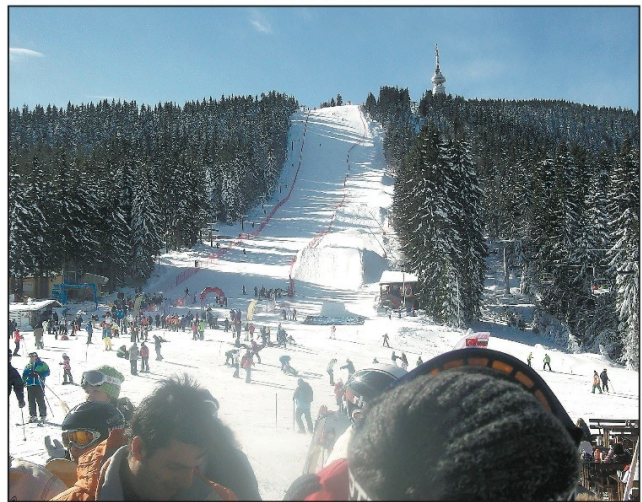
This is a black slope - honest! NCL06-35s



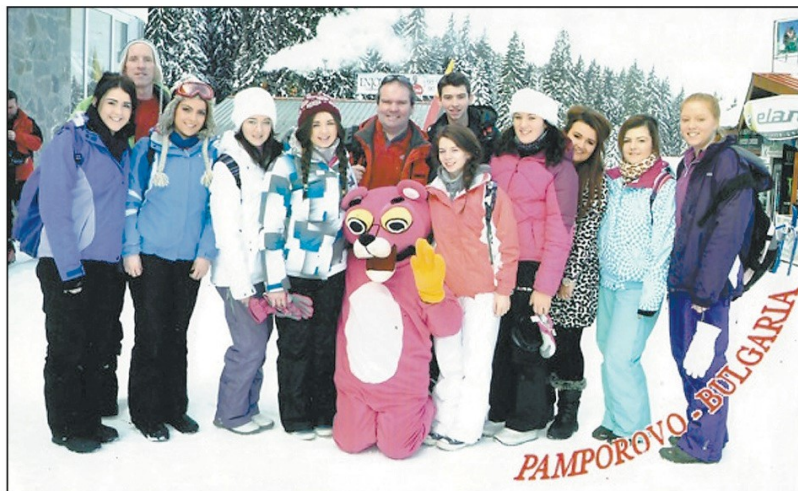
Overalls on and ready to paint the walls green! NCL06-31s



Getting ready for the slopes! NCL06-26s



The Wall! NCL06-34s



A happy Limavady team ready to hit the slopes. NCL06-33s



Rachael Hunt, Shannon Black and Sophie Young. NCL06-30s