Each summer season, the sun-drenched coasts of Bulgaria and Croatia turn into densely inhabited, intensively exploited tourism industry hot spots. This book traces the various architectural and urban planning strategies that have been pursued there since the mid-1950s—first in order to create, and then to further develop, modern holiday destinations. It portrays (late) modern resorts of remarkable architectural quality and typological diversity that have lasted for decades: as anchors of the socialist states' "social tourism", as playground for domestic publics in search of recreation and as a viable product on the international holidays market. Finally, it shows how individual resorts and outstanding buildings have been restructured both economically and physically since the fall of state socialism, and explores the present-day conflicts triggered by coastal development in the name of tourism.
Contents

1 Holidays before the Fall. Croatian hotel architecture seen through the lens of the Turistkomerc agency in the 1970s

22 Maps of Croatia and Bulgaria

25 Introduction

35 Michael Zinganel and Elke Beyer ‘Beside the seaside...’ Architectures of a modern global longing

The Bulgarian Black Sea Coast

Elke Beyer and Anke Hagemann

57 Sun, Sea, Sand... and Architecture. How Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast was turned into a tourist product

Case Studies

119 Holiday House of the Miners, Druzba

Hotel Journalist, Chayka

Bar-Variété, Sunny Beach

Hotel Sozopol-Nessebar and Hotel Kontinental, Sunny Beach

Hotel Cherno More, Sunny Beach

Russalka Elite, near Balchik

The Hilton Varna, Golden Sands

Irakli Beach

Dom Neofit, Neofit Rilski
Contents

The Croatian Adriatic Coast

Michael Zinganel
155 From 'Social Tourism' to a Mass Market Consumer Paradise. On the democratization and commodification of seaside tourism in Croatia

Maroje Mrduljaš
171 Building the Affordable Arcadia. Tourism development on the Croatian Adriatic coast under state socialism

Norbert Mappes-Niediek
209 A Thorny Thicket. The singular case of workers' self-management and long-drawn-out privatization in Croatian tourism

Case Studies
223 Hotel Marjan, Split
Hotel Pelegrin, Kupari
Hotel Libertas, Dubrovnik
Babin Kuk, Dubrovnik
Sun Gardens, Orašac
Punta Skala, Zadar
Hotels Eden and Lone, Rovinj
Haludovo Resort, Malinska

253 Authors' Biographies
254 Image Credits

Nikola Mihov
257 Holidays after the Fall. The Black Sea coast resorts at the close of the season in 2012
Gardens, but have so far not been realized. In the Sea Gardens in Varna—the city’s largest, oldest and best-known public park and landmark—the investment company Holding Varna intends to build ‘Alley One’, a mega-project comprised of a marina and numerous sports facilities, hotels, restaurants and commercial properties. And other controversial, lucrative large-scale tourism projects are in the pipeline. An interactive map on the website of the environmentalist alliance, ‘For The Nature’, keeps track of them—and keeps protests against them in the public eye.

To date, most such investment projects have operated in a legal twilight zone, yet the legislative has recently moved once again in their favour. An amendment to the Forestry Act, passed in June 2012, considerably eased private investment in sport and tourism infrastructure on state-owned land—investment in ski pistes and ski lifts, primarily—and thus legalized sweeping structural interventions in designated protected areas. Environmental activists were on the case, however, and after several days of non-stop protest, the Bulgarian President was obliged to use his veto. Nevertheless, only the most controversial clauses were revoked. In an open letter of January 2012, the Association of Bulgarian Tour Operators and Travel Agents (ABTTA) and the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT) pointed out to the President that ‘changes in the Forest[ry] Act will not help [improve] the competitiveness of the Bulgarian tourist product as a whole, but rather will [endanger] one of the pillars of its development and a key resource—the green treasures of Bulgaria—its landscape and nature’.  


National Library (1938–52), both in Sofia. A characteristic feature of the early holiday house architecture is a plinth of natural stone, which, in this case, extends over two storeys on the garden side of the sloping site. The exterior walls, piles and terraces are clad in rusted stone slabs. Further typical features are the circular terrace, on the furthest corner of the service block and the colonnades, verandas and loggias that open the building up to the sea, their respective rhythms accentuated by piles or wall sections. The upper floors are more reserved in style, simply rendered in light-coloured plaster. The slightly inclined saddle roof, with its exaggerated projection, underscores the way the somewhat squat, horizontally articulated holiday house nestles into the topography and landscape. Like the other hotels and holiday houses built in this phase, the lobbies and communal areas have stone and terrazzo flooring, as well as elaborately crafted balustrades and chandeliers.

Today, the former holiday house is run as the 150-room, 3-star Hotel Panorama. Both blocks have been extended—the guestroom block by one storey, the service block by two—although one would never know it, without looking at the older plans. The latter’s three upper storeys are now used as guest accommodation. Accordingly, their exterior design is modelled on that of the guestroom block. A new ‘interface block’ containing the reception area, communal rooms, elevator and stairs has been inserted between the two original structures, and it provides a marked contrast to them, thanks to its large windows, wide balconies and glass elevator tower. A modular roof composed of pyramid-shaped elements spans the restaurant terrace, and the obligatory swimming pool now supplements the outdoor recreation areas. Each room has its own bathroom and meets the usual 3-star standard. On the whole, the results of the expansion and modernization scheme attest to a relatively respectful approach to the holiday house’s original substance. Interior design features of the new block—the sweeping staircase, natural stone cladding and chandeliers—are likewise inspired by the architecture of the late 1950s. (AH)

Hotel Journalist, Chayka

The architectural ensemble of the Hotel Journalist reflects several phases in the development of modern Bulgarian architecture in the period 1956–68. The first part of the ensemble was built between 1956 and 1958; a high-rise block was added in 1967.

At a meeting in Helsinki, in 1956, the International Organization of Journalists resolved to build a holiday house. The Association of
Bulgarian Journalists had proposed building one on the Black Sea coast "as a symbol of friendship between progressive journalists" (Arhitektura, 1959, 5). The Bulgarian Government supported the project, and the Association of Bulgarian Journalists and its counterparts elsewhere in the socialist bloc promised additional aid. Glavproekt, the central state institute for architecture and urban planning, organized an internal design competition that served to identify a team of six architects led by Nikola Nikolov, the chief architect of the Sunny Beach resort. Built mid-way between the Druzhba and Golden Sands resorts, on a rugged stretch of cliff named Chayka (Seagull), the Hotel Journalist was ready to welcome guests by 1958. Its first construction phase consists of a 4-storey elongated block, capped at either end by a lower structure: one to its south, for the restaurant, and the other to its north, for offices. The hotel section contains circa 80 rooms facing the sea, with en suite sanitary facilities. A roof terrace and a small library were created on the topmost panorama storey.

The hotel block is similar in design to the holiday houses and hotels built at Druzhba and Golden Sands in the first wave of construction, [+ 74,81] yet looks decidedly more modern, thanks to its clear, geometric lines: the white-rendered cells with deep loggias on the first and second storeys are projected beyond the base plinth; the uppermost storey is recessed, and shaded by a striking white butterfly roof forming a pergola on the hotel’s inland side, and thus providing shade for the access balconies. By way of contrast, the base plinth of pale coquina (Balchik stone) with horizontal bands of inlaid red brick cites a traditional feature of Bulgarian architecture, such as can be found in historical monuments in Nessebar. The base plinth and likewise the interiors evince the same elaborate craftsmanship as earlier hotels and holiday houses: a broad staircase spirals from floor to floor, connecting several spacious lounges, each of which has distinctively patterned terrazzo flooring.

In 1967, the holiday house was extended by the addition of a slender, oblong high-rise block, set atop a flat plinth containing the reception area and conference facilities. Thanks to its ten upper floors with hotel rooms, plus a recessed rooftop level, on a cliff-top location, the high-rise dominates the entire locality. The new addition—which likewise benefitted from Nikola Nikolov’s expertise and is typical of the second wave of construction in Bulgaria’s Black Sea resorts—takes up the combination of traditional motifs and the International Style. Large slatted or solid façades in a variety of materials structure the shaft of the high-rise; the guestroom loggias are open to the sea breeze.
Hotel Journalist in Chayka, side view of the façade. Evidently, hardly any changes or repairs were ever made to the original materials. Photo: Nikola Mihov 2012.
and sunshine; the stairwell on the inland side of the building is shaded from top to bottom by metal slats that create a semi-transparent impression. In the 2-storey plinth, modernist elements are combined with traditional materials: decorative inverted arch elements along its sides appear to support the upper floors; its front façade is recessed and fully glazed; and its lateral façades consist of loosely layered, rough-hewn natural stone and a partial facing of timber latticework.

Today, the hotel is little changed and still stands in extensive grounds, but the neighbouring slopes are densely covered with villas and large apartment complexes. A large sign by the driveway announces this is the 'International House of Journalists' but, in fact, it is open to the general public these days, under the name Park Hotel Journalist. The original high-rise is still in service but looks badly in need of an upgrade, while the older hotel block has been refurbished on the outside, and its interior upgraded to 3-star standard. (AH)

Bar-Varieté / Colosseum, Sunny Beach

Since the early 1960s, the resorts designed expressly for Bulgaria’s international visitors aspired to offer not only sun, sea, sand and the quiet parks and public reading rooms available since the mid 1950s, but also sophisticated evening entertainment. At the heart of Sunny Beach, therefore—the resort built on an 8 km stretch of sandy beach to the north of Nessebar—a bar-cabaret, incorporating a 360-cover restaurant, was built and opened in 1964/65. Its architectural style and interior design won instant acclaim.

A detached, glazed rotunda crowned by eye-catching concrete ventilation elements, it occupied a prominent position on the beachfront. [→ 102] The stylish 'Bar-Varieté' neon sign above its entrance, the epitome of Sunny Beach nightlife, featured in countless photographs in the 1960s and 70s. Light and lightly clad entertainment was offered on a central stage, while a casino welcomed guests on the ground floor. With its three separate entrances allocated respectively to guests, staff and artists, the building functioned virtually as a small-scale model of the strict spatial divisions typically applied within Black Sea coast tourism, doubtless also in order to rule out any misunderstandings as to the type of services on offer. With regard to the architecture itself, and the interior design realized largely in marble, smoked glass and bronzed metal, the journal Architektura concluded that a successful balance had been struck between 'respect', a 'festive atmosphere' and 'frivolity' (1965, 8).
Apart from minor renovation and a new sign on the façade, the building itself has changed little but serves now only as a casino. The interiors were remodelled several years ago but already show signs of wear and tear. The fundamental change has occurred outside: the rotunda has been engulfed along two-thirds of its circumference by the 8-storey Colosseum Hotel and an eponymous apartment complex, the latter comprised of 60 seafront residences—many of which are (once again) awaiting a new owner—and 11 commercial outlets.

The two new buildings take up the original structure’s dimensions then further develop them in a stepped construction. Likewise, their façade design partly reprises the visual effect and rhythm of the rotunda’s horizontal glazing. A wall now runs between the hotel, beach and access road, to shield off a part of the complex and thus assure guests privacy in the newly created pool area. The Helios Palace Hotel, located immediately to the north of the complex, consists of similarly designed circular buildings, built around 2004.

The Colosseum complex was the first project undertaken at Sunny Beach by the Dinevi Group, one of Bulgaria’s biggest players not only in tourism real estate but also in construction. Founded in 1989, the Group has a range of holdings specialized in services, marketing, interior design and personnel management. It has made its mark as a pioneer and benchmark developer of ‘closed type holiday villages’, i.e. gated community-style beach and winter sports resorts in the high-end tourism sector. From 2000 to 2008, when construction on the coast was booming, the Group invested hugely in deluxe apartment complexes, building hundreds of apartments in Sveti Vlas, a small town just north of Sunny Beach, as well as the Dinevi Marina, the largest of its kind in Bulgaria. The mother of Dinko and Jordan Dinev, the company founders and major stakeholders, happens to have held office as the mayor of Sveti Vlas for the last thirty years. The Group is estimated to have invested circa 60 million EUR annually, at the height of the boom years, in developing over sixty holiday resorts and hotels, both on the Black Sea coast and in ski resorts in the mountain regions of Bulgaria. Its activities marked a paradigm shift, namely the creation of a new type of tourist product, comprised of a comprehensive palette of services, marketed and managed by a single company, and offered within the exclusive framework of a luxury resort accessible solely to guests and staff.

The buildings that now encompass the emblematic Bar-Variété probably barely register on the Dinevi Group scale of investments. Yet they are a telling detail nonetheless, for they illustrate how developers, since the turn of the millennium, have exploited every last inch of unbuilt land and every legal loophole, in order to expand the tourism development begun under the state socialist regime. (EB)

Hotel Sozopol-Nessebar and Hotel Kontinental, Sunny Beach

Starting in the mid 1960s, the Sunny Beach resort was extended to the north and the south of its centre, mainly by the addition of individual hotel complexes, each informed by a distinctive architectural language. Among these number the Hotel Sozopol-Nessebar and the Hotel Kontinental, both situated in the southern part of Sunny Beach. Nikola Nikolov, chief architect for the entire resort, designed both of them, in the case of the Sozopol-Nessebar, in collaboration with the architect Lilyana Stoyanova. These hotel complexes differed from the many ‘stand-alone block’ or ‘high-rise solitaire’ modernist hotels built shortly before or in parallel, owing to the intricate layout of their elongated, low-rise guestroom wings. This gave rise to semi-public courtyards and inner passageways—and the typology is hence often described as the ‘monastery type’.

The Hotel Sozopol-Nessebar consists of two elongated buildings (the Sozopol and the Nessebar), each of which has its own entrance and reception area. Both consist of 3 or 4-storey guestroom wings with access balconies, built around a courtyard garden. In each case, one additional guestroom wing with a central corridor layout leads off from this courtyard structure. The passageway from the street to the dunes, at the narrowest point between the hotel’s two sections, exudes an almost intimate charm. The volumes of the foyers and the dining areas set distinctive accents within the overall ensemble. Above the entrance to the southern section of the building, a fully glazed restaurant with a panoramic view and a striking projecting roof frames above a solid wall of natural stone, 5 or 6 metres in height. An artful stained-glass window accentuates the entrance to the building’s broad, squat northern entrance and dining area. The selection of building materials is generally quite remarkable: here, instead of the abstract, homogenous white walls found in the resorts’ forerunner modern hotels, exposed brickwork in warm amber tones was used to fill in the exposed reinforced concrete skeleton. The plinth storeys are clad to good effect in layered natural stone. Balcony parapets, doors and window profiles reveal natural stained wood elements. Vertical iron tie-rods on the balcony side of the guestroom blocks are another eye-catching feature. This
A The Hotel Sozopol-Nessebar was given a new envelope, which incorporated the original balcony bands in order to extend the structure's depth.

B New decorative balustrades on the access balconies facing the inner courtyard, 2010.

C View of the entrance in 1975...

D and in 2010.

Hotel Kontinentall, Sunny Beach
Architects: Nikola Nikolov and Collective, 1968

B Reception building and courtyard in 1972...
C and after restructuring.
Photo: Nikola Mihov 2012.
choice of down-to-earth materials lends the building interesting haptic qualities and a mellow ambiance. The building's scale emphasizes human dimensions, and their layout creates shaded courtyards: cool oases of calm that serve as semi-public access routes and recreation zones. Cobbled paths and numerous cypress trees likewise evoke the atmosphere of traditional Bulgarian monasteries.

By 2002, however, the poor quality of the original building materials could no longer be overlooked: the hotel was in urgent need of an upgrade. Vladislav Nikolov, the original architect's son, took on the modernization scheme and thereby committed to preserving as much as possible of his father's architectural design. Certain compromises were required of him nonetheless: the exposed brickwork showed signs of extreme deterioration and was therefore plastered over, whereby the visual immediacy of untreated materials ceded to a conspicuous colour concept. As the guestrooms had to be extended to meet current
standards, the deep balcony bands were used to extend the structures’ depth. New balconies were subsequently hung in front of the new envelope, and embellished by white parapets and ornate wrought-iron railings. Round arches crown the vertically layered parapet elements along the edge of the roof. A dramatically swung projecting roof now shelters the entrance to each hotel. The architect also added glazed circulation routes and wheelchair access ramps, and created new spaces for restaurants and other services. However, decisive design elements, such as the walls, flooring and paths of natural stone, were mostly retained: despite the extensive facelift, they still convey the hotel's original flair. Today, the Hotel Nessebar Beach can be found in package tour catalogues: a 3-star, all-inclusive hotel, whose introverted structure and location directly behind the dunes make it ideal for a quiet family holiday.

Nikola Nikolov also designed the adjacent Hotel Kontinental, following quite similar principles. In this case, the wings of the building mark out an inner street that faces south. The building’s reinforced concrete skeleton is exposed here too, but the infillings are white rendered brickwork. The balcony parapets are of timber and steel, as in the Sozopol-Nessebar but, here, some of them are completely clad in timber planking. The use of gigantic, loosely interlocking, precast concrete pantile elements to create sculptural sunroofs, effectively placed to shade the balconies, is probably the Hotel Kontinental’s most striking feature. At other points, concrete brackets are used to support balconies, flowerboxes or the sunroofs themselves. Thus, trendy exposed concrete is used to make a playful reference to elements of traditional Bulgarian architecture. The Bar Orient and the Restaurant Magura, located at the southernmost limits of the complex, appear almost brutalist in style. The Bar Orient consists of two structures: one is composed of oversized pantile elements, the other of box-like concrete elements and larger-than-life waterspouts. The Magura consists of a flat building in exposed concrete, with large terraces set beneath an impressive stack of flat or beam-shaped concrete elements, which dramatically projects over the sidewalk below.

The Hotel Kontinental looks little changed today, on the outside, and is in relatively good condition. By contrast, the Bar Orient and Restaurant Magura look virtually deserted—the Magura now houses two small restaurants and a supermarket; the terraces evidently serve only as storage space. (AH)

Hotel Complex Cherno More, Sunny Beach

In a dune landscape, some 5 km south of the centre of Sunny Beach, a new complex comprising eight hotels, two restaurants, and several stores for groceries, cosmetics and clothing was built between 1968 and 1971. Architect Stefka Georgieva, of Glavproekt in Sofia, designed it as a small, compact urban district made up of 5 or 7-storey hotels set along both sides of an inner street and interlinked by ancillary buildings and footbridges. Extending from north to south over 220 m, the complex used to offer rooms and restaurant covers for up to one thousand guests. The rooms vary in format, from singles through to maisonette apartments on the upper floors. Construction of all the buildings is based on a uniform 6 x 7.2 m module. The load-bearing structure consists of pre-cast concrete frames, with exposed yellow brick infillings. Repetition of this construction style, as well as the use throughout of the same design elements—for example, corner windows and corner pillars set at a 45° angle to the building—underscore the modular structure of the development as a whole. Variations both in the buildings’ height and their sightlines somewhat loosen up the complex’s outward appearance. Trees and dune grasses surround the complex yet it still looks very urban, when seen from afar. Individual hotels in the cluster can be identified easily from a distance because their names are written in neon lights on the roofs. Via a small path through the dunes one reaches a broad white sandy beach in only two minutes—ideal for a family holiday.

The Cherno More complex is a prime example of how, in the late 1960s, Bulgarian tourism architecture seized on international trends. At the same time, architects consciously sought to build by cost-effective means. In combination with other projects erected simultaneously in Sunny Beach, the complex also exemplifies how exploring local themes in a broad range of architectural and urbanist idioms helped create a sense of place in the otherwise rather monotonous, flat landscape. While hotels such as the Sozopol-Nessebar and Kontinental played through modern interpretations of the traditional village or monastery structure (+ 131), the striking concrete façades of the high-rise Hotel Europe, Hotel Kuban and the like were designed to signalize a standard of luxury that could hold its own in the world. The Cherno More, for its part, made an aesthetic virtue both of density and of conspicuous thrift in the choice of materials, responding thus to the more pedestrian needs of mass tourism while nonetheless conjuring a
View from the dunes of the Cherno More hotel complex in Sunny Beach in 1974.
townscape that contemporary critics declared was ‘exotic’, ‘romantic’, and reminiscent of the narrow alleyways of small Dutch or Mediterranean towns.

The complex is still run today as a cluster of autonomous hotels named Sirena, Delfin, Aktiniya, Morska Zvezda and Amfibiya, whereby it is difficult to tell whether these supposedly distinct entities are not actually all still in the hands of one and the same company. The guests arrive courtesy of German and British tour operators. The architectural complex is largely unchanged: only the large restaurant in the Amfibiya, the southernmost hotel, has been radically redesigned, its façades clad now in smooth natural stone and green-tinted mirrored glass. The rooms of the hotel and its interior and exterior communal areas were renovated between 2000 and 2004, and thereby upgraded to meet current standards in the low to middle price range. The newly added pool with bar is accordingly a rather small one, and shared by all five hotels. A whole string of eclectic hotels and apartment complexes has sprung up in the immediate vicinity, and the beach is therefore rather crowded in high season. There is also a dearth of restaurants and entertainment in the area, which gives young tourists, in particular, cause for complaint. (EB)

Russalka Elite, near Balchik

The holiday village of Russalka opened in 1968/69 in two phases, in a beautifully situated bay close to Cape Kaliakra and Balchik. The bungalow park with 522 units, various bars and restaurants, a marina, reception area and offices is a fully self-contained resort, several kilometres away from the nearest village.

In 1970, Club Med acquired a 30-year lease on the property, which henceforth welcomed guests from the West only. Some of its cubic, whitewashed bungalows, with natural stone or timber details, are detached, while others interlock in clusters, echoing the traditional settlement pattern of mountain villages in the Veliko Tarnovo region. They are embedded in a rocky landscape, in which the remains of an ancient fortress have been found. Some bars and restaurants also reflect traditional architectural motives and materials, while others attest to free experimentation, with slanted surfaces and complex geometric forms. Besides the small bays below the cliffs, and a man-made sandy beach, the resort provides a few small shops and various sports facilities, including fifteen tennis courts, a swimming pool, archery and mini-golf.
In 1990, ClubMed considered renewing the lease for a further ten years but ultimately gave up the resort. In 1998, with privatization in full swing, it was bought for 2 million USD by the Bulgarian finance and industrial development company AKB Fores Holding, which is owned by Nikolay and Evgeniya Banev, and has circa 100 financial, industrial and real estate companies in its portfolio. However, when ClubMed left, it took its marketing network, know-how and ‘gentils animateurs’ with it, and the new owners found themselves obliged to slash prices, in order to maintain the established market foothold. Yet the ClubMed concept—a combination of relatively simple accommodation with high quality, architecturally diverse communal spaces and a range of sporting facilities, in an exclusive location, aimed at a well-heeled public—proved fundamentally incompatible with the mass marketing strategies pursued, at the time, in the region by leading international tour operators.

Russalka Holidays, a subsidiary of AKB Fores Holding, now manages the resort under the brand name Russalka Elite. The resort still offers an all-inclusive programme, but one aimed at low to middle-budget tourists and it also welcomes day-trippers, often in tour groups, who pay admission. Visitors’ reviews suggest little remains of the resort’s former exclusive ambiance and varied sports facilities. The architecture itself is well preserved, however. The bungalows, restaurants and bars seem barely changed, although their interiors were largely remodelled from 2002–04.

Purchasing Russalka in 1998 was only a first step into the world of tourism real estate for AKB Fores Holding, whose ventures range from a hazardous chemicals cargo terminal to emissions trading. In fact, the company seems to be open for virtually any lucrative business, including energy resource development in the area around Russalka. AKB Fores later invested in the development of hotels and apartment complexes in nearby Kavarna—where it also had plans to open the Rock City Mall, since jettisoned owing to the financial crisis—as well as in hotels and ski lifts in the Vitosha mountains, close to Sofia. It thereby drew on Swiss capital, as well as other sources. Russalka Holidays also owns a number of camping sites around Sozopol, on the southern stretch of Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast, where the local authorities announced major re-zoning measures in early 2008, and invited tenders for building land. Property developments there are likely to be followed by major improvements to infrastructure, which can be expected to benefit EVN Bulgaria, a subsidiary of the Austrian electricity supplier, EVN. AKB Fores, meanwhile, has suffered adverse publicity for several
years, owing to its controversial proposal to build a resort (as a joint venture with Swiss Properties) in the protected area of Irakli. [→ 147]

In 2005, this triggered outrage among Bulgarian environmentalists and social activists, who subsequently fought long and hard to prevent it. (EE)

Helios Spa & Resort / The Hilton Varna, Golden Sands

The hotel complex Helios Spa & Resort was built in 2003/04, in the southern part of Golden Sands. The development comprised two 8-storey blocks (Helios I and II), with 730 beds in total, connected by their joint reception and pool areas on the ground floor, and by the Aphrodite Spa in the basement. Their elevated site, though relatively far from the beach, enjoys a fantastic sea-view, unlikely ever to be blocked by new construction. Helios I and II replaced two small, simple hotels, built in the 1960s: the Vezhen and Murgas, with 60 respectively 28 rooms.

In the early 2000s, both these formerly state-owned hotels, and their valuable grounds came under the ownership of the private company, Crown Hotels Group, as part of a controversial exchange deal involving the Varna School of Economics. The subsequent massive development of the site caused uproar. The owner of Crown Hotels Group, Georgi Velchev, was already well-known, even notorious, on account of his intensive development of tourism real estate in Golden Sands, Obzor, Ravda and the Rila Mountains, and similar speculative ventures—while his elder brother, Milen Velchev, happened to hold office as Bulgaria’s Minister of Finance, from 2001 to 2005.

The design and construction of Helios I and II were assigned to Proarch, an architectural office founded by Petar Dikov in 2000, and based in Sofia. By 2005, Proarch had built over a dozen hotels with several hundred beds each, in Golden Sands, all standing out owing to their ice-cream colour schemes and the swing, high-tech canopies that shade their entrance areas. Proarch also built large apartment complexes on the southern stretches of Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast—like the Obzor Beach Resort and the Sea Palace in Ravda—as well as a shopping mall in Varna, residential and commercial developments in Sofia, numerous hotels and residential developments in Bulgarian ski resorts, and an aqua-park and university campus in Abu Dhabi, before the economic crisis drastically reduced its pace of activity in 2009.

Adjacent to the new Spa & Resort, a remarkable terraced structure could be found: the former Hotel Veliko Tarnovo. It was one of three almost identical stepped slabs, situated in parallel but at a distance from one another, on the slopes below and to the south of the Helios. [→ 83]
Designed in the late 1960s by the architect Dechko Dzhumakov, this trio was a striking architectural feature of Golden Sands: terraced white volumes, whose horizontal façade bands stood out against the verdant landscape. The Hotel Veliko Tarnovo and its two sister hotels were privatized as single lots, and renovated independently of one another, some time after 2000. The Veliko Tarnovo was incorporated in the Helios Spa & Resort complex, which used it as an additional guest wing for a few years, before tearing it down in 2010, to make way for the new jewel in the Crown Hotel Group’s portfolio: the Hilton Varna.

This new venture belongs to a complex development strategy pursued by the Helios Spa & Resort, and overseen by its German manager, Claudio Sturm, formerly the manager of the Hilton Sofia. By associating the Helios Spa & Resort with the global Hilton brand and further upgrading its wellness facilities, its owners hoped to cement a foothold in the high-end market. However, the Crown Hotel Group also knew that it was vital to hold onto its share of the larger tour operators’ market, and it therefore ultimately opted for a three-pronged approach. Accordingly, Bulgarian news agencies were informed in early summer 2010, that the Hilton Hotel Group was planning a new venture in Golden Sands, namely to open Bulgaria’s second Hilton after the Hilton Sofia. Business at the Helios Spa & Resort continued as usual under its established name; in the northernmost wing, the Helios II. Its former central wing, the Helios I, was upgraded, and restructured as an independent entity, and re-opened on 21 December 2010, under one of the Hilton Group’s less exclusive brand names, DoubleTree.

Meanwhile, the ‘real’ new Hilton in Golden Sands, still under construction as we go to print, is yet another Proarch creation and scheduled to open in 2013, according to the manager, Sturm. Idealized renderings show a white, stepped construction, set obliquely to the verdant slope, as well as spacious terraces dotted with people in casual business wear. Yet, unlike the Helios complex and numerous other hotels built before 2005, its size and anticipated room key correspond to the guidelines established in the 1970s. Finally, the local authorities have woken up to the fact that overcrowding threatens to ruin Golden Sands’ reputation, and to further reduce revenue decimated since the real estate bubble burst. Accordingly, new hotel projects are no longer permitted to exceed the size and room key of their predecessors on the same site. For better or worse, the new Hilton Varna will have no choice but to respect the ghost of the Veliko Tarnovo. (EB)

Irakli Beach

Irakli, near Cape Emine, is one of the last virtually untouched beaches on Bulgaria’s Black Sea coast. Only holidaymakers in search of simple pleasures make their way to the campsite on the estuary there, at the mouth of the river valley. Independently-minded Bulgarians used to seek out this lovely, deserted spot to enjoy sun, sea, sand and forests beyond the ubiquitous gaze of the Party and the state. Irakli was little known for many years but the entire country awoke to its charms in 2005, after news broke of investors’ plans to develop the protected area. The ‘Save Irakli!’ campaign launched by young activists soon snowballed: a broad coalition of civil rights groups and environmentalists opposed the dubious tourism development — and ultimately managed to overturn it.

After the year 2000, when the real estate boom kicked in on the Bulgarian coast, property developers rushed to buy up land, also around Irakli, where the restitution process had returned state property to local individuals. In 1994, however, the Bulgarian Ministry of the Environment had designated circa 42 hectares of land around Irakli beach a protected area for rare species; this had effectively outlawed construction there, and restricted camping to specified sites. During Bulgaria’s EU accession process, the area of Irakli and Cape Emine were designated to come under NATURA 2000 legislation to protect Europe’s most characteristic habitats and species. Yet none of this prevented the Nessebar local authorities from granting a building permit for the area to Swiss Properties Ltd, a company owned solely by a Swiss letterbox operation called Bulgaria Property Invest AG. Riverside Village, the luxury holiday development foreseen in 2005, was to be a gated complex on circa 10,000 m², comprised of a 4-storey apartment house, a restaurant and sixteen villas. Both the property companies are believed to belong to Georgi Velchev, whose elder brother Milen was Bulgaria’s Minister of Finance from 2001 to 2005. (→ 145) Swiss Properties Ltd proposed no less than four similar developments in the immediate vicinity, while Bulgarian investors AKB Fores (→ 141) and Telemah expressed similar aspirations.

Faced with the imminent destruction of the landscape around Irakli, a group of young people mobilized creative resistance as well as every available legal means to vigorously protest against the exorbitant development of the Black Sea coast. The ‘Save Irakli!’ campaign sued the Bulgarian state and local authorities for their failure to respect EU legislation, as stipulated in the NATURA 2000 treaty. The Bulgarian
Ministry of the Environment was thereupon obliged to issue a one-year construction ban in 2006—the campaign's first victory. The ban was subsequently prolonged, but investors nevertheless resumed building work in early 2008. 'Save Irakli!' responded with actions designed to hit the headlines. Local landowners, for their part, protested against the construction ban and the environmentalists, for fear of losing the expected profits loomed large. There followed various long drawn-out court cases and parliamentary hearings in Sofia and Brussel. Massive earthworks and preliminary foundations—building work carried out in defiance of the initial ban—led ultimately to the threat of EU sanctions. Finally, in summer 2012, the Supreme Administrative Court of Bulgaria declared the entire development to be illegal. It ruled that developers should remove all trace of interventions to date, and restore the protected area to its previous state.

Irakli set an important precedent, pertaining not only to the preservation of protected areas, but also to national and local authorities' accountability to the citizens of Bulgaria. The collapse of the centrally planned state socialist economy had effectively put the mechanisms of state regulation and spatial planning in abeyance. And the public, at least initially, had little experience of organizing social movements for the defence of civil rights. In consequence, although the Bulgarian Constitution states that the beaches belong to everyone, and guarantees the right of every citizen to access them freely, investors managed to develop over two thirds of the Bulgarian Black Sea coast in twenty years, undeterred and with nothing in mind but their own economic interests. The great majority had little say in the matter. The 'Save Irakli!' campaign therefore struck a chord with the general public. It seemed self-evident, vital even—and it quickly gained broad support.

'Save Irakli!' activists systematically demand transparency from the local authorities—something certain municipalities along the Black Sea coast seem to find quite foreign. It proved virtually impossible, for example, to obtain information from the local authorities in Nessebar, which are notoriously subject to allegations of corruption. In 2010, local citizens were even denied the right to inspect the most recent master plan for Nessebar, approved in 1997. The 'Save Irakli!' campaign thus defended not only a protected area but also civil rights in general. In parallel, environmental organizations, such as the 'For the Nature' alliance, mobilized protest against other dubious construction projects on the coast (in the Strandzha National Park and at Karadere, for example) as well as in mountain regions. Resentment about the sell-off of the landscape and the corruption widely believed to
accompany it catalysed a new wave of civic opposition, which in 2012 took the form of broad-based action against proposed amendments to the Forestry Act.

The downside of drawing public attention to the situation at Irakli was an increase in visitors. Civic-minded responsibility for the ecological fallout is assured, however, by a regular communal, trash-gathering, clean-up action on Irakli beach. It takes place at the start and end of every summer season, and has already become something of a tradition. (Emiliya Poyova)

Dom Neofit, Neofit Rilski

Neofit Rilski is a small village, located approximately 30 km west of the Black Sea port city of Varna. In 2008, the London-based architect couple, Torange Khosseri and Andreas Lang, purchased a derelict former farmhouse, built some time around 1900, and refurbished it as their holiday home.

In the hope of finding an affordable place in a hot climate, where they and their two children might spend the summer holidays, they had searched the Internet for potential locations near the Black Sea coast. In the mid 2000s, Brits and other Europeans were buying up properties in Bulgaria at a rapid pace. (+106) Houses close to major cities or the sea were snapped up in a matter of weeks. One house for sale on the website of Bulgarian Properties, one of Bulgaria’s biggest agents in holiday real estate, immediately caught Torange’s eye because of its traditional facade, hinterland setting, unobstructed view of the countryside and relative proximity to both Varna and the Black Sea. Uninhabited for a decade, the house was a total wreck and needed serious renovation—and was thus an ideal opportunity for two architects who found the refurbished local properties mostly not to their taste. Purchasing the property, refurbishing it and finding someone trustworthy to manage it proved easy. The architects ran the refurbishment process from distant London: communication with the builder relied heavily on speech bubbles sketched on pictures of the construction site. The conversion turned the farmhouse into a two-bedroom detached house with very spacious rooms for sleeping, dining and living. The new simple and elegant design is respectful of the building’s original rustic character. In the interior, white-rendered walls contrast the rough-hewn, exposed timber beams and the restored vintage furniture. Torange and Andreas offer their house for rent to other holidaymakers when not using it themselves.
Neofit Rilski is not a tourist hotspot but a living village, where people grow grain and vegetables for their own needs and for sale, keep cattle and poultry, go to work in nearby factories, sit outside their houses in the evening to chat and socialize, and engage in local events. The village, like many rural villages in Bulgaria, relies on an intangible collective heritage of agricultural and food preservation skills, crafts, memories and traditions, the wealth and value of which is generally maintained and shared orally. The cultural significance of this heritage is often underestimated and little appreciated in present-day Bulgaria. From their in-between position as new landowners and temporary residents, Torange and Andreas began a slow but steady dialogue with the long-term village dwellers, in order to blend in and to understand everyday life and customs. After five years in Neofit Rilski, impressed by the village's rich agricultural production on various scales, and by local stories old and new, the architects propose to invite their neighbours to participate in a project to share stories and knowledge, skills, lost crafts and everyday culture, with the goal of drawing out and mapping the intangible heritage of the village. (Torange Khonsari)