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By Peter Chayney, This is Travel

'That used to be the only restaurant in the old town of Nessebar, during the Communist era,' says my taxi driver, Nasco, pointing to a nondescript building with a few tables and chairs on the pavement outside. 'Not any more.'

Indeed. Nessebar, a small town on the Black Sea coast in Bulgaria, is just a few minutes away from the thriving coastal resort of Sunny Beach. Day trippers and other tourists now throng the many restaurants you find along the town's quaint, cobbled streets.

The whole area has been touted as the 'new Costa del Sol', and the Bulgarian authorities are keen to compete for Britain's sunshine tourists.

Before heading for the beaches to assess their similarities with Spain's coastline, I decided to explore the town properly.

Nessebar is a small island connected to the mainland by an isthmus. It was founded by the Greeks in 510BC and was designated a UNESCO World Cultural Heritage Site in 1983, having fallen variously under Roman, Byzantine and Ottoman control.

The charming old town boasts 40 medieval churches in various states of repair. The church of Saint John the Baptist, from the 11th century, houses a small art gallery with piped muzak.

The best preserved church - that of Christ the Pantokrator is an eye-catching mix of white marble, red brick and glazed ceramics and also contains a gallery.

Balconies overhang the uneven cobbled streets and the town's red roofs lend it to comparisons with Dubrovnik, though on a much smaller scale.



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Tourists browse the stalls lining the streets selling a variety of traditional Bulgarian crafts, colourful glasswares, tablewares and ceramics, as well as silver and carved wooden Orthodox iconography.

Some of the best of the new restaurants are on the peninsula's rocky cliffs: the perfect setting to sample the fresh catch. I'd recommend the succulent battered white fish with a sweet spicy sauce, known as fillet Nessebar style, while you watch the small, scruffy boats sway back and forth in the gentle tide.

However when the sun shines, as it usually does, most tourists make a beeline for the seaside. Unlucky with grey skies, I resolutely headed out to Sunny Beach, a resort established in 1958 when the only visitors were almost exclusively from friendly Communist nations.

Now signs all over Sunny Beach are similar to signs in Spain. Not in the local language of course but in both English and German with restaurants offering 'English sausages' and 'Bacon butties.'

Don't expect boutique hotels or much in the way of architectural elegance - these are seriously large hotels set on the grand sweep of the bay.

There are more than 160 resort hotels, with around 70,000 beds available, and the number is ever increasing. In fact, there are only three types of land in Sunny Beach - land with hotels on it, land with hotels being built on it and land that will soon have hotels being built on it.

But people don't come to Sunny Beach for the architecture, they come for the sun and the ample beaches. And because it's cheap. Wide paved promenades lead down along the beach with shops selling, clothes, shoes, DVDs and CDs, all at bargain prices. You'd be hard pushed to spend more than £10 on a meal and the local beer costs around 60p.

A number of the bars are open 24-hours, and to see a barman that loves his work check out trendy XL, at the ground floor of the Hotel Kuban. The sea-front Happy Duck is a popular night-spot amongst younger British tourists and staff line up shot glasses along the bar as the sun goes down.

But it's not an adults-only destination - there is plenty for youngsters to do when the novelty of the beach wears off. Most of the hotel complexes have a variety of sports facilities such as tennis courts and mini-golf as well as playgrounds and kids' clubs with reps on hand to organise games and events.

Along the beachfront, funfair attractions fill in the gaps between the shops and restaurants - ranging from old favourites such as

trampolines and bouncy castles to dodgems and mini-bungees.

But most importantly the sun (usually) shines, the beach is golden and the water's safe.

Janet Moran from Southampton is a seven-times veteran holidaymaker to these parts, one of thousands to return to the area. 'It's clean, has nice restaurants, good beaches, lots of sunshine and it's cheap: you can live like millionaires,' she told me.

So is it the new Costa del Sol? Maybe. It certainly has the hotels, bars and beaches you'd expect. But while you can still get so many Bulgarian Leva to the pound, it's the value of the place that makes now the perfect time to explore beyond the Mediterranean.

Travel facts

Peter Chayne travelled with Balkan Holidays and stayed in the Hotel Flora in Nessebar, Bulgaria.

A seven-night break from 26 September costs £315 and includes B&B accommodation, flights from London Gatwick to Varna Airport, and all transfers. To make a booking call 0845 130 1114 or book on line at www.balkanholidays.co.uk

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