

WHY I WILL BOYCOTT BULGARIA

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From Emma Mahony. Times Online, December 11, 2007.

Bulgaria, you are boycotted. I, for one, as travel journalist and mother of three, shall never darken your airport doors, nor set foot on your blood-stained ground until you clean up your act and start to look after the vulnerable children in your care.

Anyone who has the stomach to view BBC's forthcoming documentary on Wednesday 12 December at 11pm, will understand my disgust. This trailer gives you a small taster of the levels of deprivation and cruelty suffered by mentally and physically disabled kids as bossy matrons tend to them. Children are left to rot in their beds or locked in overcrowded dormitories overnight while the director of the care home denies any wrongdoing.

I watched it through my fingers with my mother, who was insistent that we saw the whole programme, despite my desire to pull away when a child with a broken leg (seen clearly sticking through his skin) was roughly handled by a so-called carer.

"I have friends on holiday in Bulgaria, right now", said my mother, in a quiet voice.

Cheap property and budget travel has helped us to overlook Bulgaria's track record, whereas Romania, also welcomed into the EU this January, was forced to improve childcare as a condition of EU membership after the efforts of JK Rowling to launch the new charity Children's High Level Group.

Bulgaria has the highest proportion of institutionalised children in Europe, with charities estimating between 20,000 and 29,000 children vulnerable to the physical and degrading abuse shown on this documentary in just one institution.

As a travel journalist, before the children's plight was exposed on TV for the first time last month, I even suggested to one mother that Bulgaria would be a cheap skiing holiday for Christmas.

Now, I feel sickened when I picture the open face of a mute boy, wincing next to a violent ex-offender, having been beaten because he was the perfect victim that couldn't talk.

Recently, a lot of fuss was made when a British woman, in search of a better (and, no doubt, cheaper) life was killed by a pack of wild dogs while out walking in the Bulgarian countryside. There are estimated around 35,000 wild dogs in the capital Sofia, alone.

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Comments flew online between Bulgarians and the rest about whether the country merited its entrance to the EU while savage animals were allowed to roam its cities, was Bulgaria a first or third world country? For me, the death of one middle-aged British woman is far less shocking than the harrowing sight of children desperate for any human touch or warmth, viewed in the last shot of the documentary. I dare you not to be moved by that pathetic scrap of humanity at the end. Watch that film and you will want to join the campaign, write to your MEP immediately.

The official Bulgarian government response to the programme was a statement saying: "Not a single institution has received a bad or unsatisfactory assessment for the health services they provide".

Such denial in the face of death-camp-style cruelty makes you weep. This is not 1940s wartime Europe, this is 21st century living. Easyjet or Wizz Air can tout elsewhere for money for flights to Bulgaria. They won't see a penny from me.