

Love story behind innovative tour company

BY KATE CHAMBRÉ

A POWERFUL love story lies at the heart of Northern Ireland's oldest package holiday tour operator. Mrs Radka Lynn, the founder of Balkan Tours, started working as a tour operator in 1976 several years after falling deeply in love with her late Irish-born husband Michael, following a chance meeting in the Bulgarian city of Varna. Their eyes met across a table in a restaurant and soon after, the Bulgarian woman was literally swept off her feet and taken to live in Nigeria for five years where Mr Lynn, a former Major in the British Army, was working as an accountant at the time. Later, when she arrived in Northern Ireland, she was approached by a Bulgarian embassy official and asked to organise summer trips between Bulgaria and Ulster for an English tour operator. It was a huge success, and not long after, she was asked to organise winter skiing holidays between the two countries, the first person ever to do such a thing. After doing a reconnaissance mission to Bulgaria's skiing destinations, at her own admis-

sion, dressed "inappropriately in high heels and a mink coat", Balkan Tours was officially born in 1977, as the first independent travel company of its kind in Northern Ireland and the Republic. This was also during Communist times in Bulgaria, making the venture all the more admirable. Having started out using a typewriter with two fingers, she, and her eldest son Theodore, who has played a pivotal role in running the company since the early days, now employ 12 people throughout Northern Ireland and the Republic, as well as four reps in Bulgaria. But more impressively, up to 15,000 people, including groups of school children, travel every year from all over Ireland to Balkan Tours' ten summer and winter destinations. When the mother-of-two first started working as a tour operator in the late 1970s, she said the company used to take between two to three thousand tourists to its summer resorts, namely Golden Sands and Sunny Beach. Meanwhile, initially around 2,000 people per year used to go on Balkan Tours' winter holiday breaks. Now over 10,000 tourists visit its six summer resorts each year, and over 4,500 its four winter skiing resorts. Mrs Lynn, 68, admits that she was quite "nervous" when she first began operating between Ireland and Bulgaria. But, she said, the loving support of her husband, who she met in the Black Sea holiday resort of Golden Sands, gave her self-belief. Recalling how she met him, she said: "My mum was in the hospital. Before I went to collect her, the doctor and I sat outside and had a meal." Serendipity would have it, that her future husband, was sitting across the table at the time. "He (Mr Lynn) sent a servant to ask us if we minded if he came to sit at our table. "We said 'of course we don't' and then we started to have a conversation," she said. "He was very gentlemanly. He was working in Africa, and he stopped in Bulgaria on his way back to Northern Ireland and that's why he was hanging around in Varna. It was very much a love story."

The late Mr Lynn, originally from Monaghan, sadly died over a year ago, aged 83.



COUPLE: Mrs Radka Lynn with her late husband Michael

The hard work behind the success

GROUPS of Ulster tourists used to be flown to Bulgaria by Russian Tupelov aeroplanes when it was part of the Communist block. Mrs Lynn, the founder of Balkan Tours, laughs when she recalls how this was perceived by the Northern Ireland media at the time. "At the beginning, when I started the business, they were writing in the papers that the Russians are flying over Northern Ireland," she said. During Communist times in Bulgaria, holidaymakers also frequently had to use vouchers to buy their food when visiting Balkan Tours' summer destinations. The businesswoman – who used to greet tourists off the aeroplane in traditional full Bulgarian dress – has many a story to tell about running Northern Ireland and the Republic's oldest tour operator under the Communist regime. Some might say Mrs Lynn's childhood fuelled her determination to establish her reputation as one of Bulgaria's – not to mention Ireland's – most successful businesswomen. Mrs Lynn grew up in the Bulgarian city of Sofia and was the second eldest of four children (she had two brothers and a sister).

She does not paint a picture of doom and gloom. One advantage of growing up in a Communist country, she says, is that nobody was "any better or worse off" than you. "Bulgaria as you know was formerly a communist country and was not filled with rich people. We were more or less equal people," she explains. A mother to sons Theodore and Francis, Mrs Lynn began providing for her parents and siblings at a young age. "I started to work from a very young age, maybe that is what made me ambitious," she says. "I started to support my family at the age of 15-years-old, when my father became ill." Her father was a builder and "always made sure" that there was food on the table. "Once he became ill we all did our bit to help the family survive." Over the past 32 years, Mrs Lynn has established a celebrity-like status in Bulgaria, because of the way in which she has transformed tourism in the country and helped boost its economy. Everywhere she goes, she says, people come up and chat to her, even though she does not necessarily

know who they are. "I just love what I do," Mrs Lynn says of her work. "I feel like I will go on for ever and ever, maybe until I drop dead." Her experience of living in different countries has meant she has been able to impart helpful advice to Bulgarians in the hotel and airline industry over the years, especially as tourism was becoming a new phenomenon there. "It's not nice to talk about myself but I was always going to Bulgaria on my holidays and I gave the Bulgarian people a lot of advice on how to run their hotels and restaurants." She openly admits too that she has also given Bulgarian air hostesses advice in the past on customer relations, such as "smiling" at tourists. Working in a male-dominated business world was difficult at times, despite the support of her Monaghan-born husband, she admits. "I was just one woman against maybe ten men." Despite outside appearances Mrs Lynn believes that the former Communist regime in fact helped her business in many ways. "To tell you the truth, the

Communism helped business quite a lot. Bulgaria was quite safe to travel in because there would not be anybody attacking you or stealing your car," she says. "And suppose I had a package for one week or two weeks and I wasn't doing well, I would send a fax to Balkan Tourism and say "please help, these flights are not full – what can you do for me?" "Willingly they would reduce their prices in the plane and their prices in their hotels and we started to do very very well." But she adds: "They (the hotel and airline industry) were always willing to help during Communist times. Now nobody helps. Now you just have to be friendly with them and if you are lucky, and you are friends with them sometimes, but not all the time, they will give you a good deal." What is her proudest achievement in her life so far? "That I am very successful and that I have opened up beautiful Bulgarian tourism to the people of Ireland."



ACHIEVEMENTS: Mrs Lynn in her youth, in traditional Bulgarian dress



TAKING QUESTIONS: Kate Chambré (third from left) interviews Mrs Lynn during a press conference in the ski resort of Pamporovo, Bulgaria

During his long and distinguished career, he served in the British Army, worked as a high-powered accountant in Africa, was a Director of Queen's University, a senior representative of the Northern Ireland Tourist Board, and also oversaw Balkan Tours' accounts. The beginning of Mr and Mrs Lynn's relationship, however, was by no means a bed of roses. "It was communist times and they (the Bulgarian authorities) would not allow us to marry. "You were not allowed to marry from outside. You had to get permission." Frequently the couple went to the ministry of Foreign Affairs to ask if they could marry but were refused permission every time.

Eventually, her husband paid the Minister of Foreign Affairs in Bulgaria a visit and asked "how much it would cost" to buy his wife. "The next thing – I think they were embarrassed – the President of Bulgaria, Todor Zhivkov, (the last Communist leader of the country) signed my marriage." The couple had been married for over 40 years when Mr Lynn died last year. The grandmother-of-three, who has homes in Belfast, Bulgaria and Spain, said she was "heartbroken" when he died. "When my husband died last year, I felt like the world had finished for me," she said.



ON THE SKI SLOPES: Bulgaria's skiing resorts are becoming an increasingly popular alternative to other more expensive European destinations such as France, Austria and Switzerland

Introducing schoolchildren to the splendid ski slopes

THOUSANDS of schoolchildren from Northern Ireland have travelled to Bulgaria on skiing trips over the past 32 years. Cheaper flights, hotel rooms and affordable meal prices in comparison to French, Austrian and Swiss resorts are among the reasons for this. Pupils from Ballee Community High School in Ballymena have been going on skiing trips to Bulgaria for many years. Paul Murdoch, who is the school's youth tutor, will soon be overseeing the organising of his school's annual winter excursion. "The two most important things are firstly safety and then the price of the holiday," Paul told the News Letter. Helen Waterstone, who is secretary to the Principal at Ballee Community High School, also stresses that "safety is the most important issue" when taking groups of school children away on ski trips, followed by the overall price. The school's next winter expedition to Bulgaria, she says, will cost approximately £455 per pupil (including flights) plus around £80 extra spending money. Gary Greene, who teaches religious

education and sociology at the North Coast Integrated College in Coleraine, believes taking pupils away on skiing trips is good for their morale. "I think it's a good opportunity for kids to get away on a skiing holiday with the school because a lot of their parents aren't interested in going themselves," he said. "If it wasn't for organised school trips, they simply wouldn't have a chance to go otherwise. The holiday is also good for bonding." His colleague Johnny Strong, a geography teacher at the North Coast Integrated College, says the school usually takes groups of 40 each time, with a ratio of one teacher to ten pupils. "Primarily, price is a major factor for going to Bulgaria and generally speaking, the actual resorts there are as good as I've seen in Austria and France," he said. Johnny – whose school has visited Pamporovo at least four times – also feels the skiing tuition is up to a very high standard in Bulgaria. As for the evening entertainment, he added: "The level of evening entertainment for adults (when not on school trips!) is also really good."

Balkan Tours winter skiing holidays began in 1978 and according to its founder Radka Lynn, became very successful overnight. The initial success, she partly attributes to the late Brother Gallagher, formally a teacher at Belfast's Christian Brothers' Grammar School. "He approached me and said: 'Mrs Lynn, I'll help you. We have many children who would love to go skiing in Bulgaria,'" she recalled. Since then, with the help of word of mouth, and the media, Balkan Tours' winter breaks have become an increasingly more popular alternative to skiing in pricier destinations across Europe. She admits, however, that Balkan Tours has always attracted more school groups in Northern Ireland than the Republic, due to principals here being slightly more flexible about when their pupils can go on the ski trips. ■ **For further information on school trips and package holidays to Bulgaria contact Balkan Tours in Belfast on 028 90 246795/ 90 32 5902 or email Roberto@balkan.co.uk. Alternatively look up www.balkan.co.uk**



PICTURESQUE: the resort of Borovets, which aside from skiing, also offers holidaymakers an abundance of evening entertainment

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