

THE BEAUTY OF “NEW EUROPE”

In the beginning there was the sauna. Or Thai massage, or ayurvedic massage, or at most a Turkish bath. Today, now that the infatuation with oriental exoticism has passed, the trends in “well-being” draw fully on the traditions of the New Europe. **Proof that the cultural osmosis between East and West is also accomplished through a decidedly peripheral path: the path to beauty.**

From Russia with steam; in Italy the trend of the Russian bath is becoming ever more popular with “well-being tourists.” A true institution in its homeland (banyas), it was popularised in western Europe in the 1800s, when the French adopted it, perhaps to get over the defeat of Napoleon. The first Italian centre has opened in Milan on Via Cagnola near the Parco Sempione, and it offers a compete two-hour treatment that exploits the benefits of a light steam treatment with essences of eucalyptus, silver fir, currant and mint. What makes it different from a normal steam bath? The fresh water, which flows over scorching stones at a temperature of 500 degrees. But, the “Russian style” is not only apparent in the ablutions: the high point of the treatment is the Russian massage, carried out with a special sheaf of birch branches and eucalyptus leaves (venniki) that lightly touch and caress strategic points on the body. At the end of the treatment (inclusive of scrubs, masks and various compresses), the pampered western client can complete his full Soviet immersion by sipping smoothies and traditional herbal teas.

But, this melting-pot of beauty

treatments is also evident in other fields, like surgery. Western Europeans have discovered the East (above all, Romania, Poland and Hungary) as a destination for face-lifts, liposuction, eye-lifts and botox injections. The reason is simple: the operations are much cheaper, but just as safe.

According to the Romanian Foreign Ministry, at least half of the 50,000 foreigners who visited the country did so to go to a plastic surgeon.

“My clients come mainly from Western Europe,” says Tiberiu Bratu, director of a clinic in Timisoara, “they find the same quality here, but at accessible prices.”

Poland also attracts silicon maniacs. Aylin Ofias, a German woman suffering from cellulite, saddlebags and non-existent breasts, chose a Polish centre to get rid of the problem and save \$9,000. **“In Warsaw, I paid \$3,300 for an operation that would have cost \$12,300 in Berlin.”** Same thing for less superfluous operations: Pier and Hanna Jensen, a couple of Danish retirees, did not hesitate to set off on a ferry to reach the Polish city of Szczecin and splurge on new teeth, “Our dentures in Denmark would have cost \$17,000 more.”

THE WORLD’S BIG BROTHERS

Neither East nor West can resist the trend of the reality show.

And while Italy expects the success of the “Big Brother” format for the fifth year running, “Celebrity Island” (a rustic version of the American show “Survivor”) makes a clean sweep of the ratings, with 10 million viewers

gripped by its presenter Simona Ventura. So while the western factory makes stars from ordinary people, Eastern Europe, in its own small way, is setting up shop . . .

The Croatian version of “Big Brother” doesn’t skimp on sex, drugs, four letter words or homosexual encounters:

in short, it has nothing to begrudge our version. Broadcast on RTL Televiziji, in the Zagreb reality show the names of the characters change (Ana Govotac, Ozren Petric, Sanjia Kvastek or Sasa Runjic instead of Pietro Taricone, Ascanio Pacelli or Marina La Rosa), but the desire to succeed is exactly the same.

Another show is “Parlaonica”, defined as a reality show in Croatia, but which seems more like the Italian show “Amici” presented by Maria De Filippi. The talk show, broadcast on the HTV2 network (the equivalent of Rai Due), deals with everyday issues like drugs, relationships with the opposite sex, family and, last but not least, gossip.

Meanwhile, in the Polish “Big Brother,” the climax was the liaison between two protagonists, Karolina e Grzegorz, which happily continued off-set, in exactly the same way as the Ascanio-Katia romance last year. **Another reality show that is very popular in Poland is “Bar,” which follows more or less the same rules as “Big Brother”** although the series begins with a larger number of participants: there are 27 people, some older, some younger, to spy on and eliminate.

Finally, we must add the corresponding Greek and Hungarian versions, both from 2002, to the list of European Big Brothers. The Turkish 2001 version was however unsuccessful (despite the



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attempt to disguise the title as "Somebody's Watching Us"). In Bulgaria the arrival of the format was even more problematic: local authorities blocked it from being broadcast by Nova TV, which was accused of not having authorisation to transmit the reality show on a satellite channel. But program's philosophy was also cause for debate, since according to the Bulgarian "Council for Electronic Media," it violates principles such as respect for privacy and the regulations set by Article 7 of the European Convention. Signed in Strasbourg on 10 April 2002, the section "Transfrontier Television" agreements regulates not only permits for broadcasting "globalised" cable programs like these reality shows, but also the decorum of the formats themselves.

SLOW (& NEW) FOOD

It's no longer just vodka and caviar for Russian billionaires or the expensive delis of the Eastern nouveau riche. From Hungarian Manganica sausage to Bosnian prune statko, **food culture – real food culture – is beginning to spread in the countries of the New Europe**, slowly assuming the shape of a globalised phenomenon. Or rather, glocalised, because the protagonists of this "Gastronomic Renaissance" are

modest local products and not exotic titbits reserved for an elite group of nabobs.

The gourmet philosophy *par excellence* of the Slow Food movement is being used as a model. In Plovdiv, Bulgaria, a group of businessmen and restaurateurs have recently set up a Slow Food Club which, in reality – Slow Food explain from their headquarters in Brà – has nothing to do with the non-profit association founded in 1989, but which takes advantage of its notoriety. The fact of the matter is that "in the countries of Eastern Europe" Roberto Burdese, Slow Food's vice-president, explains, "our gastronomic approach is starting to put down roots."

Current activity includes 150 members in Poland, banquets in Belorussia, St. Petersburg, Georgia, Armenia, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and then Sofia and other various projects aimed at safeguarding local specialties.

Eastern Europe's palate will be educated, "slowly," explains Burdese again, "moreover, we started as a left-wing association, aimed at 'democratising' a love of gastronomy, focusing on the literacy of the most marginal and poorest communities: certainly not the nouveau riche of the big cities, but peripheral groups, in the countryside, who are often in serious difficulty." And who apply

to the association to re-propose, safeguard or simply indicate a product in danger of extinction. For some time, Slow Food has assumed the burden of true subsidies, "It could be 2,000 Euros, as in the case of activating a mini-loan for an Argentinean community, but also 20,000 Euros, perhaps to buy an agricultural machine to get a certain group out of the vicious circle of poverty," but they almost always "avoid direct financing: not so much because we don't trust it, **but because we prefer to act on the infrastructures, improving service.**"

Sometimes the cases are signalled by word of mouth from the 70,000 "slow" members scattered around the globe, journalists, or university professors who come into contact with small, but vital communities on their travels. Like the group of batza shepherds in the Tatra Mountains on the border with the Czech Republic, who produce oscypek, a cheese that is unique in the world because of its peculiar spindle shape.

Of the 60 projects around the world – from Kenya to India – those that concern Eastern Europe have one particular feature. **"In these countries the totalitarian regimes caused more damage, sweeping away traditions and standardising production systems"**, explains Burdese, "So that, on the one hand, many things were lost along the way, and, on the other, it is difficult to propose valid association models to these communities that are not felt to be an imposition." But it is only a question of time: "In about 4 to 5 years," the vice-president concludes, "the projects will reach their conclusion and the 'gastronomic' integration process will be complete." ■