

PRE-WEDDING WHOOPEE!

Among the capitals of Eastern Europe it’s a fight for the last unmarried man. In the 1990s, Prague may have been first choice for hen or “stag parties” – a chance for the bride or groom and their respective friends to celebrate (separately) her or his “last night of freedom” – **but since countries like Slovakia and Estonia have begun to show the first signs of opening up and preparing for the tourist market, wildly carousing about-to-be-weds and their entourage of friends and relatives prefer the cheaper destinations of Tallinn or Bratislava to shower the groom with drinks, bets at the casino or to “drag” him to see an assortment of striptease artistes.** The trend, which originated in England, is spreading like an oil slick, notching up business for those travel agents who specialise in that kind of thing. “Until a couple of years ago everyone wanted to go to Prague”, says Jacy Meyer from e-Block, a London company that manages a chain of agencies offering pre-wedding package holidays in Eastern Europe: “Today they choose Krakow, Riga and Tallinn, where they can live it up in luxury for around 1,700 euros a head”. In Prague, the number of English visitors in the last year has dropped by 8.9% whereas the Tallin Tourist Office has registered a 62% increase in them, compared with 2005. As a result, many of the companies set up specifically to meet the demand for trips to the Czech capital are concentrating their energies elsewhere, without changing as much as a single letter of their slogans for all-inclusive packages: “Beer, Beefsteak and Blondes” or “Behave like a bad lad in Eastern Europe” are just two examples. Despite the loss of income, Tomio Okamura, spokesman for the Czech Republic Tour

Operators’ Association (AĀCKA), which has over 200,000 members in the profession, says it’s no surprise that some people in Prague are looking on the bright side: “As a travel agent and tour operator, I’m not at all put out that this type of tourism, which was getting pretty close to sex tourism, should move elsewhere”. After all, along with the pound sterling, it brought a certain amount of trouble: noise and disturbance at night, aggressive drunkenness and rowdy high spirits, which, according to a recent study on (bad) British behaviour abroad, especially in the Czech Republic, every year require the intervention of the Consulate; to the point where the British Embassy has imposed a fee of £80 per hour every time it’s called in to sort out a brawl. “The stag party business began to expand with the boom in cheap flights provided by English airlines”, says Hannelore Breitmeyer, owner of the Red Hot & Blues, a live music restaurant in the centre of the Czech capital. “Since then we’ve noticed **a lot more young foreigners, especially English between the ages of 24 and 36, in what are usually the quiet months: January and February. We’ve introduced special breakfasts for them, based on Bloody Marys and the famous ‘hair of the dog’ beer that’s said to cure a hangover, so that they can recover from the after-effects of their excesses the night before**”. Is competition lying in wait in the East? If it is, it’s no bad thing for the Czech Republic: “Today Prague is experiencing a new kind of tourism based on families and couples with children”, reports Karin Seligová, the spokesperson for the Czech Tourist Office, “they’re very different from the unmarried youngsters. At least they don’t make a mess or get drunk”. And, above all, they stay in

the city centre hotels for longer than the classic “fun and frolics” weekend.

SUPER (CHAOS) MARKET

Gourmet foods, exotic fruit and vegetables, beauty and personal care products... these are the items filling the baskets of the “Indian Urban Shopper”, India’s new consumer category, a class that is increasingly westernised and ready to buy personal goods and homeware. **A report by AcNielsen, which recorded a rise of 14% in domestic “non-essential” spending over the last year, highlights the change in Hindu consumption: from 50 to 57 US dollars per month** goes on items that are not strictly necessary. “It’s a figure that is more encouraging than ever, which indicates that a greater share of the purse is being spent on shopping, but also that we have reached an important stage in the development of domestic trade”, commented Shrikant Kulkarni, Associate Director of AcNielsen India. Supermarkets in particular – the new type of Indian “consumer Mecca” – are ousting the traditional retailer and small, often family-run shops. The giant Wal-Mart is putting the finishing touches to a joint venture with local company Bharti Enterprises Ltd. which will act as its distributor to retailers and small traders (Indian law prevents large corporations from selling direct to the consumer), while the British Tesco and French Carrefour have already opened their first single-brand stores. But as the country succumbs to “Wal-martisation”, there is also a characteristically local version of the process. A 45-year old entrepreneur (now a millionaire), called Kishore Byani, is the champion of the “chaos theory”. Head of the business empire,



Pantaloon Retail Ltd., seven years ago he founded his chain of "Food Bazaar" supermarkets on the lines of the European or American model: hygienic shelving, polished aisles, everything shipshape. And was it a success? No way. Because people came in, dawdled up and down the aisles without even touching the goods on display and left the stores without buying anything. Byani realised that Indian shoppers were used to a bit of dirt, to the disorder and chaos of itinerant hawkers in crowded, noisy streets and, in order to feel at ease – and buy more – they needed a special ingredient: **chaos**. **"In India it's part of the furniture", Mr. Byani explained to the "Wall Street Journal": "For an Indian, dirt on the vegetables means they're fresh and that they really do come from a nearby field"**. When that thought struck him, he didn't waste a moment before investing 50,000 dollars in making over his first store in Mumbai, thereby launching a pattern adopted by all the other 93 Food and Big Bazaars scattered around the country. Nonetheless, Byani said, "It wasn't easy to create an environment that's chaotic and functional at the same time". He's managed it to perfection. So much

so that this year Pantaloon's turnover has reached 875 million dollars, thanks to a model – the bazaar-type supermarket – which promises to survive despite the invasion of western retail giants.

CASUAL BELIEVERS

Extremely religious: **the citizens of Serbia have always claimed to be very devout. On the surface that is, because in fact they rarely go to church, pray very little and hardly ever open a Bible**. This generally held, long-standing image has been cracked from top to bottom by a recent opinion poll that is backed by analyses carried out by Serbian sociologists, philosophers and theologians. Zorica Kuburic, a religious sociologist, reports that 18% of those who claim to be atheists "act religious" simply to be socially accepted, whereas, philosopher Tomislav Zigmanov points out, in the Balkans the church wants to manipulate religion for political reasons, and theologian Vladeta Jerotic adds that the Orthodox faith has degenerated so much it hardly recognizes its own roots, maintaining its traditional outward appearance only in the form of some customs and the ritual Christmas and Easter

celebrations, without really understanding their significance and, above all, without having read the Eternal Book: the Gospel of Christ. Yet another theologian, Radovan Bigovic, claims that Serbs are only religious "on paper", that only a few actually attend church and even those that do go, go because it's the thing to do. While the older generations are falling out of love with ritual, young people are becoming interested in putting new life into religion in the Balkans. **Every summer in Serbia there is an event called "Divided God" which tries to bring together people from Bosnia, Slovenia, Turkey, Germany and Serbia to create a multi-cultural dialogue on the role of religion**. The original intention of the project was to investigate the church's presence in post-Communist countries in an attempt to understand whether religious associations are founded on tolerance and the search for solutions to concrete problems, or whether they too contribute in some way to the growth of these problems. The project tries to find some answers through the exchanges made between the young people, but the general opinion is that the Serbs have become atheists, that they've lost their identity and national dignity. It's true that some go to church, fast at certain times of the year and behave as believers, but only when it serves their interests. That's broadly the opinion that emerges in the various discussions on religion and atheism, which, if one reads between the lines, reveal that, for the Serbs, still believing in God is something quite primitive. "If Communism brought anything good it was widespread atheism", one such discussion states. It's a difficult relationship which continues to be reflected even in the choice of words, which claim there is no need for a place, i.e. a church, to be with God. And then there are those who save their consciences by quoting Woody Allen: "To you I'm an atheist, to God I'm the Loyal Opposition". **S.L.**