



A BIRTHDAY PARTY, DANCES, FOOD AND A BAGPIPE - EVERYTHING BULGARIANS NEED IN LONDON

Those, whose hearts are separated between BG and GB, have a special connection between each other. Kristina Hristova finds out its secret

The location is Rio Night Club, but has nothing to do with Brazil. I am sitting comfortably at the sofa situated in front of the entrance, thinking about how will I not make it to Bulgaria for Christmas due to expensive flights. The music is still not there, the people are still not ready with the preparation for the birthday party, so all I hear is these hard-working bees, buzzing nervously about where to put balloons and other decorations to make the place more colourful. I offer them my help, but they do not accept it, saying that I am a guest. "We have not become girls yet, we will manage alone," one boy, who others call "The cool Peter", winks at me while taking a stack of beer bottles to the bar.

Since April 2018 there has been a Bulgarian gathering every month. People go mainly to meet other Bulgarians and immerse themselves in traditional Bulgarian folklore dances. But what makes this night special is the 2-year anniversary since one of the folklore dancing clubs, named "Love for Bulgaria", was established by Desislava Krasteva and Marina Ivanova. "One month after I came here, I created the club with Marina. I wanted to feel like I am in Bulgaria," Desi shares with me. This is neither the first Bulgarian club created in London, nor the last one. There are at least six more and some of them are here to celebrate the unity. "It is true that we did not support each other in our home country, so why not do it now? We do not have any other choice but to be together against the hardships life serves us everyday," says Tsvetelina Miteva, the creator of the folklore club "Golden coins".

Attending this monthly meeting is the Rila mountain air for my lungs, congested with nostalgia and utopian thoughts that one day Bulgaria will be eligible for her kids struggling to survive abroad to return. It makes me feel at home and I realise I have found the cheapest and fastest way to go to Bulgaria. Five pounds and I enter a universe filled with helpful, united



and understanding natives, with whom I share one destiny – to forget about my trivial problems under the rhythm of the dance. "When I see so many of us in one place, I know that I took the right decision," Desi gets emotional, "I love to see people smile- I feed my soul with their happiness."

What is typical of the Bulgarian folklore dances is that you never play them alone, but with at least ten people and you have to find a way to synchronise with the others. The word in Bulgarian used for "folklore dances" is the same as the word "people" (hora) – the difference is in the stress. With that example, I can conclude how important these dances are for us as a nation. "When we gather to dance, I feel like I attend a wedding- I hardly know someone, but everyone is cheerful and wants to have fun and that definitely lifts my spirits," a boy named Dimitar sums up quite well the situation.

The atmosphere is magical- you are greeted at the entrance of the club with hot Bulgarian bread (called "pitka"), honey and salt- an old Bulgarian tradition for prosperity. There are also complimentary Bulgarian appetizers on each table, as a present for us from the celebrating folklore club. Enchanted by the music playing and people dancing, forming the shape

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of an open circle/oval, you grab the hand of the person next to you and join this sacred ritual of becoming one with the others under the melody of the Bulgarian bagpipe (“gayda”). At this moment you have nothing on your mind- you are just engulfed in which step to make to keep the circle harmonious and vivid.

I always dance like there will be no tomorrow and it often happens to take off someone’s shoe from excitement. Tears in my eyes appear, when I see the leader of the dance waving the Bulgarian flag. This is usually a man’s job- he does it with pride and I can see in his exhausted eyes how much courage he gets when given this opportunity. You may think that we have drunk too much: if solid quantity of water counts, because these folklore dances are really energy-demanding, then alright. Our drunkenness

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comes from the music under which we go into trance and feel the singer’s emotions. One time we will be working together in the field, we will be running happily and taking care of our land. But it may happen that we are still under the 500-year slavery of the Ottoman Empire- the dancing steps are slower and show our miserable efforts to revolt and get our freedom back.

Mesmerized by the atmosphere, I have no conception of time. I do not realise when sixty people or so join the folklore dance, while thirty others livestream the event in Facebook. Rio

Night Club suddenly starts to feel small and not enough for the Bulgarians that express their mixed emotions and wishes for a better life through the rhythm of the Bulgarian bagpipe.

