

## 2<sup>nd</sup> International Congress on World Civilisations and Historic Routes

Sofia, Bulgaria, 15-16 November 2018

### Summary

*By John Bell, travel journalist and consultant*

Starting with a flourish of dancing accompanied by the traditional gaida or bagpipes of Bulgaria this well attended conference opened with introductions from Nikolina Angelkova the Minister of Tourism for the Republic of Bulgaria and Jaime Alberto Cabal the Deputy Secretary General of the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO).

Bulgaria, a country of only 7 million people, was highly dependent on tourism said Ms Angelkova when welcoming the guests from around the world. Her country, she said was aiming to be a 'four seasons' destination with growing tourism arrivals of 8 million visitors in 2017 being a 31% increase in only two years. 'It is the story of mankind which unites us', she said, talking of the important contribution of cultural tourism. 'Different civilisations have left over thirty-three thousand monuments within the country which need to be linked together to continue to make a substantial contribution to Bulgaria's tourism offer'. Bulgaria's recent presidency of the European Union had helped promote a new Balkan tourism product with a common approach both to Black Sea and Danube tourism. 'Travelling means possessing the world', she said with cultural routes helping tourism's 13% contribution to Bulgaria's GDP.

UNWTO's Deputy Secretary-General Jaime Alberto Cabal thanked the Minister and Bulgaria for organising this important conference and added that the development of tourism routes provided both social and economic benefits for all. 'They are a powerful promotional tool', he said, 'adding to cultural, urban and rural heritage and to the aims of the Sustainable Development Goals'.

Picking up on the Deputy Secretary General's comments the opening session of the conference brought together Ministers and Senior Representatives from nine different countries and cultures.

In a wide ranging discussion hosted by CNN's Sofia Mavratzas, Ministers gave examples of the importance of historical civilisations in their respective countries with notable contributions from Iran, talking of its Persian heritage, Cambodia trying to protect the temples of Angkor Wat against over tourism, Ras-Al-Khaimah noting the need to protect culture as well as tangible heritage and a particularly moving contribution from the Deputy Minister of Administration, Finance and Tourism Affairs of Afghanistan when she talked of the attacks on the extensive culture and heritage of her country, notably the blowing up of the world's largest statues of Buddha at Bamiyan in 2001.

Vezhdi Rashidov the former Minister of Culture of Bulgaria and Chairperson of the Committee on Culture and the Media of the National Assembly confirmed that, in his view, in government, culture should be separated from tourism although they should then go on to work together. In a spirited speech he set out Bulgaria's extensive heritage from many cultures and empires from Byzantine, Thracian, and Roman through Islamic to its present Balkan heritage. 'Instead of stealing tourists from each other', he said 'let's develop a Balkan tourism triangle between the great city of Constantine the Great – now Istanbul – together with Athens and Sophia'. He called for the creation of a Valley of the Thracian Kings similar to that of the Valley of the Kings in Egypt and said that tourism would make our

societies richer and better. He pointed out the major archaeological sites being uncovered near the conference venue in Sophia and, in fact, a tourism exhibition and farmers market was opened on such a site at the end of the session so delegates would have some idea of the work being conducted in the City.

It may come as a surprise that in such a conference there can be talk of historic routes which are less than a century old. The session on Creating Signature Cultural Tourism Experiences produced such a surprise. The well-respected Nikolay Ovcharov – Adviser to Bulgaria’s Ministry of Culture - highlighted that country’s Via Rhodopica whilst a very different route – that of the Phoenicians – using the waters of the Mediterranean Sea linking Phoenician influences was described by Antonio Barone from Italy. Although the pilgrimage routes of Santiago in Northern Spain are well known Maria Nava Castro, the Director of Tourism for Galicia set out in detail with substantial statistics the development of these historic pathways. But it was Aaron Mahr the Superintendent of National Trails for the U.S. National Park Service who brought the conference in to the twenty first century by explaining how, on a very limited budget, he had attempted to save the historic Route 66 from falling in to disrepair. It’s not often at such conferences that delegates receive a lesson on the repair of famous neon signs!

Inviting questions from the floor it was very pleasing to see that delegates had arrived from as far away as India – paying their own way – to contribute to the proceedings and demonstrate the importance to tourism of these historic routes.

In fact, the twenty first century continued to intrude on the Conference with a presentation by Jens Thraenhart from the Mekong Tourism Development Office. Here was an example of routes available through six countries co-operating with each other (China, Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia, Lao and Vietnam) to promote a common social media platform. It is often accepted that the best form of advertisement is that from those participating in the product and that’s exactly what was demonstrated here with Facebook and Instagram contributions streaming in from travellers in the region. These could be collated, the conference was told, and turned around to show fellow travellers what was on offer. There were competitions for short films plus web site development for small businesses. All in all, a welcome reminder to delegates that, in the real world, social media and big data are currently the king.

Then, to close, it was the turn of one of the great routes – famously the most well-known route in the world – the Silk Road. Patrick Fritz from UNWTO reminded delegates of the extensive work done by UNWTO and its Silk Road members over the years. Perhaps one of the leading examples of an UNWTO project. That work continues and Stella Kostopoulou updated delegates on her work with the European Interdisciplinary Silk Road Centre at the University of Thessaloniki. Barnaby Davies the co-founder of Eastguides West demonstrated his professionalism as a guide by reminding everyone of the needs of his profession in a short and very practical address. ‘It’s all very well creating these routes’, he said, ‘but we have to guide them, protect them, and interpret them for the visitor’.

But, in this report, we’ve left until last mention of our keynote speaker. He wasn’t old and highly academic, but he’d had his dose of civilisations and routes and what’s more he didn’t just come and tell a motivational story but contributed from the floor throughout the two days of this conference. Kai Markus is a man driven by an outrageous idea to, with little money or back-up, leave his young family and run from Hamburg to Shanghai. We listened with open mouths not just to the story of a great athletic feat but a narrative of care and compassion for those he met along the way. His culture stops so he could interact with local people; his highs and lows at borders and with visas and, perhaps, most importantly, his injury and the care and compassion shown to him. It reminded us all that the creation and protection of World Civilisations and Historic Routes depends on one thing, the commitment of ordinary people.

## About the author

**Mr. John Bell**, Travel Journalist and Writer



He has been a journalist for prominent media for over thirty years, specialising in travel and transport. Starting with the BBC in London, he produced and reported for their travel and transport programmes on radio and television. Moving to Channel 4, he edited their first programme on independent travel, "Travelog", which ran for 10 years reporting from such places as Bhutan and North Korea. John has edited the CNN International "Hotspots" worldwide travel show and also makes frequent appearances on BBC radio and TV where he is linked to BBC World television. John has worked with the UN World Tourism Organization for twenty years, advising on marketing, media, aviation, crises and the Silk Road Initiative. He has moderated and spoken at conferences in many countries and given numerous interviews to press, radio and television. He is a well-known figure in the travel industry world-wide having worked in over one hundred countries from Azerbaijan (where he wrote a travel book) to Zimbabwe including Korea – both South and North.