

Remarks by Principal Deputy HR Larry Butler at a Conference on BiH Tourism

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Let me begin by sharing with you three of my passions!

I am a skier, a hunter and a hiker.

Over the years I have had the good fortune to follow wilderness trails through some of the world's most spectacular landscapes – including the American Rockies and the Appalachian Trail that parallels America's East Coast.

I am here this morning to tell you that Bosnia and Herzegovina offers a palette of outdoor experiences that are second to none – and this in a cultural milieu that is distinctive and yet little known.

So, when I talk to you about Alpine tourism, adventure tourism and cultural tourism – the three gems in the crown of BiH's nascent hospitality industry – I am speaking as a satisfied consumer as well as an ambassador.

Other participants this morning will, I am sure, speak in more detail about Bosnia and Herzegovina's tourism potential, so let me sketch an overview which may usefully place some of what follows in context.

The BiH tourism sector is only now at the start of a postwar recovery that can be rapid and that can generate a very substantial dividend in terms of inward investment and new jobs. The country's strengths in the tourism sector are clear.

- This was the venue for the hugely successful 1984 Olympics.

- The natural environment has escaped the ravages of overdevelopment characteristic of Western countries – as yet, there are mercifully few jerrybuilt hotels.
- Bosnia and Herzegovina's cultural and artistic heritage is a fascinating and unique fusion. (The whole world witnessed the tragedy that ensued when the Islamic, Orthodox and Catholic traditions in BiH were brought into conflict – but what many people have yet to realize is that this is a country where these traditions have coexisted peacefully for centuries in productive harmony, and this has produced a remarkable literature, music and architecture).
- And I should stress that this cultural mix is a way of life. Culture in this country is not a thing of history – it's celebrated in cafes and town squares, in the songs and dances of weddings and festivals. Traditions abound – but they are living traditions, not preserved in formaldehyde to be trotted out for the next busload of charter tourists.
- Visiting BiH offers extraordinarily good value for money – tourists will find that their Euros go a very long way.
- Since BiH is a relatively small country it is possible to enjoy very different kinds of attraction within a short time frame – during the Sarajevo Winter Festival, for example, you can ski during the day, and attend the Opera in the evening; the piste is barely 30 minutes from the National Theatre. Not many cities anywhere in the world offer that kind of combination.
- Compared to neighbouring Croatia, for example, BiH may be rather rough and ready – but it is friendly. Whatever tour guides, taxi drivers and waiters may lack in finesse they more than make up for in exuberance – the people of BiH are instinctively hospitable.
- And BiH is remarkably accessible – currently, there are around a dozen daily flights, most of an hour or less, from Munich, Vienna, Prague and Zagreb, using a modern

airport in the centre of the country.

One of my responsibilities as the Principal Deputy High Representative is to co-chair a Working Group coordinating the effort of municipalities and private companies to develop the Bjelasnica-Igman ski resort near Sarajevo . This was one of the resorts that hosted the 1984 Winter Olympics – and I can report nearly four meters of snow on the ski slopes when I was there Sunday!

We believe that if this facility is developed in a responsible – environmentally sensitive – way it can become a major international attraction. We also believed that it can serve as a model for other Alpine resort developments.

As I mentioned earlier, there will be more detailed presentations by tourism professionals this morning, but let me just touch on one BiH attraction that will perhaps illustrate why this country is, for example, a walker's heaven. Of the 4,000 species of high-altitude flowers in BiH, more than 400 are indigenous. What that means is that our mountains are not only beautiful – they are environmentally distinct. In addition to that, BiH has one of only two remaining primeval forests in Europe. Little Red Riding Hood is still trying to evade the bad old wolf somewhere in there!

I could add a long list of activities related to walking and white-water rafting, para-gliding, fly-fishing, boar hunting, bird watching and painting, pot-holing and archaeology – there are just hundreds of relics of empires and kingdoms gone by to visit and marvel over. There is even a short stretch of Adriatic coastline, which produces oysters and mussels as well as sea fish.

Now, let me touch on an issue that makes Bosnia and Herzegovina a rather different tourism proposition from most other countries.

It already has an international reputation.

And, unfortunately, this is based on the news footage that most people will remember from the 1990s.

It is therefore important that we get the word out – loudly and clearly – Bosnia and Herzegovina is no longer a war zone. It is a small European democracy with a growing economy and a deepening and expanding relationship with the European Union.

Here's a handy checklist:

- BiH has one of Southeast Europe's most stable currencies – inflation is nearly zero and has been for several years;
- In the years since the end of the war, the police and judiciary have been overhauled and brought into line with standards elsewhere in Europe – street crime is practically non-existent, one less thing for a tourist to fret about;
- The armed forces have been vastly reduced in size and brought under full democratic control, and BiH is now preparing to join NATO's Partnership for Peace;
- More than a million people have returned to their homes.

I am delighted to be here in London talking about the potential for BiH's emerging tourism sector. For prospective visitors, this country represents a treasure trove of discovery and enjoyment – it truly is one of Europe's last best-kept secrets. For BiH itself the dynamic and creative development of its tourism resources offer a real possibility of attracting serious investment and creating new jobs in the kind of numbers that will have a major positive impact on economic growth and living standards.

That's an attractive win-win proposition – and one that I hope we will bring closer to reality with this conference.

Thank you