On the last weekend in May, 45 delegates from 20 countries gathered in rain-soaked Sofia for the start of IFEAT’s 10th Study Tour to Bulgaria. With them, the delegates brought the sunshine; the rains from the previous week disappeared and there followed five days of almost perfect weather – making the precautionary Wellington boots ordered for each delegate for the rose field visits unnecessary. Sadly, the originally planned onward trip to Turkey had to be cancelled due to security concerns. As a result, this study tour was the shortest to date. Although the programme was packed, the range of oils and extracts covered was limited. Nevertheless, as the comments from participants illustrate, this was one of the best study tours to date.

Here are just a few of the comments from the Bulgaria Study Tour (BST):

“Thank you all for the beautiful journey to the Valley of Roses. We enjoyed the tour and thank you all for making this yet another memorable tour.”

“Thank you ALL for this successful and rewarding experience, the camaraderie amongst us was off the charts. In terms of rose and lavender oil knowledge, my first study tour was stellar.”

The tour concentrated on rose and lavender oils, in which Bulgaria is the world’s leading producer. During the five days, participants were able to gain an intimate knowledge of their production and processing, alongside some smaller oils. The tour provided an excellent opportunity for the participants to meet Bulgarian producers, processors and exporters as well as discuss a whole range of F&F topics with other delegates from a diversity of countries and backgrounds. Everyone was there to learn and to have a hands-on experience.

The timing of the tour was perfect, with early morning visits to the rose fields enabling delegates to experience and participate in the picking of the flowers during the season’s peak! Unfortunately it was too early in the season to witness the harvest and distillation of lavender, which takes place a month later. Nevertheless, the participants enjoyed visiting the lavender fields, which had just started to bloom.

Touring the Rose Valley, participants were able to see Bulgaria’s beautiful physical landscape and culture during their travels, in part thanks to the sponsorship of the Bulgarian companies we visited. IFEAT would like to thank Berje Trakia Ltd., Galen-N Ltd., Rosa Eterna Ltd. and Vigalex Ltd. for their sponsorship, as well as Balikov Ltd., the tour agent who provided excellent support and logistics. However, particular thanks must go to two local organising committee members, Filip Lissicharov (Enio Bonchev) and Andrey Mitov (Vigalex), who accompanied the tour throughout the week, for their dedication and hospitality. As one delegate said of them: “I have never seen anybody so open in sharing process details and other technical information.” This, combined with company visits, the “coach lectures” and the professionalism and warmth of the welcome, meant that delegates gained an intimate knowledge of Bulgaria’s essential oil production, processing, marketing and end uses. One innovation introduced on the first day of the tour in Plovdiv was a series of five lectures on topics covering various aspects of Bulgaria’s essential oil industry. A visit to Rosa Impex, a major producer and exporter of a wide range of cosmetics, followed this.

On Tuesday, delegates visited rose growing fields and then the operation of Galen-N and Kateko, where another local organising committee member, Miroshchi Milchov, provided a detailed guide to the company’s growing, distillation, concrete and absolute extraction operations. This tour included a visit to a new pharmaceutical ingredient production facilities as well as a lunchtime lecture on dry rose flower extract. In the afternoon, a visit was made to Rosa Eterna’s essential oil processing facilities. Wednesday began with a very early morning visit to Enio Bonchev’s rose picking operation with stunning views overlooking the Rose Valley. Delegates were shown the new high tech software facilities monitoring rose harvesting and then competed in a rose picking competition. At both Enio Bonchev and Bulatters, which was visited in the afternoon, delegates were given in-depth tours of each company’s new and old distillation facilities, as well as their impressive rose museums. The detailed description of the uncommon carbonation technique, used to distil rose oil, was very interesting. Delegates also saw rose oil being very carefully decanted from the still, not surprising when the current price is approximately €12,000 per kg! The final day saw visits to Vigalex’s rose and lavender fields and its modern processing and extraction facilities. This was followed by a plant visit to Panteley Tashev Ltd. – an innovative and technological leader in the production of beverage, food and natural flavour ingredients. Throughout the tour, delegates received generous gifts from the companies they visited.

Cultural activities were not overlooked. The tour began with a tour of Sofia riding on a traditional tram. Other events included walking tours of historic Sofia and Plovdiv; an evening reception and dinner at the superb Kazanlak Rose Museum with the Mayor; visits to the Thracian tombs (a UNESCO Heritage Site); several folk dancing and singing displays in traditional costumes and a dinner accompanied by a superb male voice choir. Throughout the tour, delegates sampled the magnificent Bulgarian hospitality, wine and cuisine beginning with a welcome dinner on a roof-top restaurant with stunning views over Sofia as the sun set, and concluding with a rose themed closing banquet with fine Bulgarian wines – a spectacular end to another successful IFEAT study tour.

Peter Greenhalgh is currently preparing a book on the Bulgaria Study Tour, which will be available later this year.