

# Directory

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## ACCOMMODATION

Bulgaria offers pretty much every kind of accommodation option you can think of, from spartan mountain huts to the most opulent five-star hotels. Accommodation is most expensive in Sofia and other big cities, notably Plovdiv and Varna, although independent travellers will find prices at Black Sea resorts such as Albena, Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) and Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) even more expensive in high season. Elsewhere, prices are still relatively cheap by Western European standards. If you're travelling independently around the country, one indispensable publication is the annual *Bulgaria Bed & Breakfasts*

*Guidebook* (17 lv) published by the **Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism** (☎ 02-980 7685; www.baatbg.org), which lists sustainable, family-run guesthouses all over Bulgaria. You can buy it at **Zig Zag Holidays** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V) in Sofia. It's also worth picking up the free **Authentic Bulgaria** (www.authenticbulgaria.org) guidebook, which has reviews of some of the best hotels and guesthouses in both the cities and remote villages.

Accommodation in this book has been divided into three price categories: budget, midrange and top end. In the budget category, double rooms cost up to 50 lv (or €25); in midrange they cost up to 100 lv (or €50); anything above that is regarded as top end. However, as accommodation in Sofia is priced so much higher than anywhere else, double rooms costing up to 200 lv (or €100) are placed in the midrange bracket for the capital, and anything over that is top end.

Budget accommodation is usually very simple, and includes private rooms, hostels and cheaper guesthouses, normally with shared bathroom facilities and no air-conditioning. Midrange options offer a much higher standard and will almost always include private bathrooms and extras such as fridges and TVs. Top-end accommodation is, naturally, the best available, or at least the most luxurious and dependable. This includes international chains as well as home-grown establishments, and most of these are very modern, with top-notch facilities; Sofia, in particular, has numerous top-end options to try out. Top-end hotels commonly offer discounted weekend prices (Friday to Sunday inclusive) and it may be worth asking for discounts for longer stays, too. Some hostels in Sofia may also be willing to offer discounted rates for long stays.

Note that hotels in seasonal spots, such as the Black Sea coast or skiing resorts, frequently close down outside the holiday seasons, or may operate on a much reduced basis, closing up part of the hotel and the restaurant or cutting back staff to a minimum. So if you're thinking of staying in, for example, Pamporovo in October or Nesebár

## PRACTICALITIES

- The metric system is used for weights and measures.
- Bulgaria runs on 220V, 50Hz AC and plugs are the standard round two-pin variety, sometimes called the 'europlug'.
- Videos work on the PAL system.
- If you're visiting Sofia, pick up the English-language *Sofia Echo*, published on Friday. Other English-language papers are the *Frontier Times*, published monthly in Veliko Tàrnovo (but available sporadically around the country) and the free monthly *Sunny Times*, available on the coast. *Vagabond* is a glossy, English-language lifestyle magazine, published monthly.
- If you get very bored, tune into the government-run TV channel (BNT) or one of two private ones (Nova Televisiya and BTV). Televisions in most – but certainly not all – hotel rooms can pick up a plethora of stations from around the region, so you can enjoy Romanian game shows, Greek movies and Turkish news programmes, as well as CNN, BBC, Euronews, Hallmark, MTV and German cable channels such as DW.
- In Sofia, tune into BG Radio (91.9FM), Radio Contact (106FM), Jazz FM (104FM), Retro Radio (98.3FM) and Classic FM (89.1FM). Darrik Radio, a nationwide network of stations that usually plays contemporary pop music, can be heard in Sofia (98.3FM), Varna (90.7FM), Plovdiv (94.6FM), Ruse (104FM) and Veliko Tàrnovo (88.9FM). Several international services can be found on the FM band in Sofia, including Voice of America (103.9FM), BBC (91FM), Deutsche Welle (95.7FM) and Radio France Internationale (103.6FM). If you understand Bulgarian, try the two national stations, Horizont (103FM) and Hristo Botev (92.8FM).

in February, you really should phone ahead to see what the current situation is.

Useful websites offering hotel booking facilities and discounts include www.bgglobe.net, www.hotelbg.com, www.hotelsbulgaria.com and, for the capital, www.sofiahotels.net.

## Camping

Once a popular way to see the country on a tight budget, these days camping has lost its allure in Bulgaria. Camping grounds have struggled since losing government support and the industry, which once included over 100 locales nationwide (with half that number along the Black Sea coast), is in decline. Even privatised camping grounds tend to be run-down, so don't have high expectations.

Camping grounds in Bulgaria are rarely open between November and April, and some along the Black Sea coast operate only from June to early September. These tend to be very crowded in July and August: while camp sites will normally be available at this time, security, privacy and tranquillity are rarely guaranteed. In addition, camping grounds tend to be placed closer to noisy main roads (to attract passing customers) than to anywhere peaceful or picturesque such as a beach or lake, and are rarely convenient for anyone relying on public transport.

The cost of setting up a tent at a camping ground is about 8 lv to 10 lv per person per night, but tents are very rarely available for hire, so bring your own. Most camping grounds also rent out tiny bungalows for slightly more than the cost of camp sites, but these, too, are often far from inviting.

Camping in the wild (ie outside a camping ground) is technically prohibited but normally accepted if you're discreet and, most importantly, do not build wood fires (which attract attention and damage the environment).

## Hostels

Backpacker hostels are a relatively recent phenomenon in Bulgaria. Sofia now boasts several excellent private establishments, and there is a handful of hostels around Varna and Plovdiv, but you'll find very few anywhere else in the country.

There are no hostels in Bulgaria affiliated with the Youth Hostels Association (YHA) or Hostelling International (HI), and only one or two hostels in Sofia will offer small discounts for holders of HI or International Student Identity Card (ISIC) cards. Other hostels around the country are more basic affairs, aimed at school groups, hikers and the like.

### BOOK YOUR STAY ONLINE

For more accommodation reviews and recommendations by Lonely Planet authors, check out the online booking service at [www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/hotels). You'll find the true, insider lowdown on the best places to stay. Reviews are thorough and independent. Best of all, you can book online.

### Hotels

Like anywhere else, the hotel scene in Bulgaria is varied: basically, you get what you pay for. While many of the older, formerly state-run hotels have now been privatised and renovated, those in less-visited locations are often shabby and run-down, with antiquated plumbing and old-fashioned attitudes to customer service.

Modern private hotels have sprung up everywhere and usually offer good value. Some hotels offer more expensive 'apartments'. These are usually double rooms that are more luxurious and feature more amenities. 'Suites' normally have either two double bedrooms or one bedroom and a lounge room, sometimes with an extra sofa-bed.

Hotels (but not private homes, mountain huts or hostels) are rated from one to five stars, but one- and two-star places are rarely proud of the fact so often don't advertise their rating. Some hotels do not offer single rooms or single rates in a double room. If this is the case, only the rates for doubles are listed in this book.

International chain hotels, such as Hilton, Sheraton and Radisson, now have a presence in Bulgaria and offer the usual high standards at the usual international rates.

Most smaller and more remote ski-resort hotels are closed in summer (from about mid-April to November), while many places along the Black Sea coast, especially the purpose-built resorts such as Albena, do not open between late October and early April. Hotels in cities such as Varna and Burgas will be less dependent on the weather for customers.

Whether breakfast is included depends on local competition. In some towns every hotel includes breakfast, while elsewhere it's optional, costing an extra 4 lv or 5 lv per person (or considerably more in a five-star hotel). Although it's convenient, breakfast in a local café will probably be tastier and cheaper.

Unless stated otherwise in this book, reserving a room in advance is not normally

necessary, except if you're determined to stay at a particular place or are visiting at peak times (eg Nesebăr in August or Bansko at Christmas) or during a major festival. If you want to stay at one of the Black Sea coast's package resorts such as Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) during the summer, it's advisable to book at least a few months ahead. You'll probably find it easier and cheaper to book a package deal in your home country.

### Monasteries

About a dozen of the 160 monasteries around Bulgaria offer accommodation to anyone, of either sex, from pilgrims to foreign tourists. Some rooms are actually inside the monastery, such as at the Rila and Cherepish Monasteries, or at guesthouses within metres of the monastery gates, eg the Trojan, Dryanovo and Lopushanski Monasteries. Some only offer rooms on a sporadic basis and availability may be unreliable; contact the monasteries directly to see if they have room.

### Mountain Huts

Anyone, especially those enjoying long-distance treks or shorter hikes, can stay at any *hizha* (mountain hut). Normally a *hizha* only offers basic, but clean and comfortable, dormitory beds with a shared bathroom, which cost from 10 lv to 35 lv per person per night. Most are open only from May to October, but those situated at or near major ski slopes are often also open in winter. In or around a town or village along a popular hiking/trekking route, you can also often find a *turisticheski dom* (tourist home; a fairly comfortable hotel with double rooms) or a *turisticheska spalnya* (tourist bedroom; a more basic, dorm-style hostel).

It's often not necessary to book these in advance, but beds at most of the 200 or more mountain huts, hotels and hostels can be reserved at the **Bulgarian Tourist Union** (BTC; Map p88; ☎ 02-980 1285; [www.btsbg.org](http://www.btsbg.org); bul Vasil Levski 75, Sofia). The office is tucked inside a photo shop in the underpass at the junction of bul Vasil Levski and ul General Gurko. The BTC office also sells some hiking maps and the *Hizhite v Bălgariya* book (written in Cyrillic, which details the locations of, and amenities at, most places in the mountains. **Zig Zag Holidays** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 5102; [www.zigzagbg.com](http://www.zigzagbg.com); bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia) can also arrange accommodation in the mountains and villages.

### BUYING PROPERTY IN BULGARIA

The Bulgarian property market is booming as never before: prices rose by as much as 27% in the second quarter of 2007 – the second-highest recorded rise anywhere in the world – and they show no sign of dipping. Prices are being pushed up by foreign investors; Brits especially have been flocking to the country in search of holiday homes, lured by low prices and the promise of long, hot summers by the sea, snowy winters in the expanding ski resorts and rustic country idylls. By Western standards, house prices are often amazingly cheap; it's still possible, for example, to pick up a run-down village house (with, ahem, lots of potential) for under €10,000. If you're looking to buy in hotspots such as Bansko or somewhere near the big Black Sea resorts, you can expect to pay from around €60,000-plus for a one-bedroom apartment in a luxury development, though prices vary considerably (and buying off-plan will be much cheaper).

This international interest has fuelled a building boom, with vast new holiday-home complexes appearing all along the coast and around the skiing centres in the mountains. Understandably, not everyone is happy with this situation, and environmentalists have campaigned vigorously against the seemingly unstoppable advance of the developers' bulldozers in pristine countryside areas. Locals, meanwhile, have been priced out of many areas where properties are increasingly being snapped up by foreigners and often used for only a few months a year. Money talks, however, and the building continues: marinas and golf-course complexes are among the latest wave of apartment construction while the ski resorts are expected to expand still further.

If you do decide to invest in a holiday home in Bulgaria, or even to move there permanently, remember that buying a property in a foreign country can be a complicated business. However, there are now countless estate agents specialising in all aspects of Bulgarian real estate, many of them based in the UK. Some of the more useful include [www.bulgarianproperties.com](http://www.bulgarianproperties.com), which has a huge number of houses, flats and studios for sale and up-to-date news on the property scene in Bulgaria, [www.purelybulgaria.com](http://www.purelybulgaria.com), [www.bulgarianventure.com](http://www.bulgarianventure.com) and <http://findbulgarianproperty.co.uk>. For more localised offerings, [www.blackseavillas.net](http://www.blackseavillas.net), [www.skipropertybg.com](http://www.skipropertybg.com) and [www.bulgariandreams.com](http://www.bulgariandreams.com), a UK-based company, provide news and advice on buying property in various regions of the country. Those interested in northern Bulgarian properties should consult the experienced and straight-talking Englishman Steve Molyneux of **Molyneux Property Holdings** ([www.buying-properties-in-bulgaria.co.uk](http://www.buying-properties-in-bulgaria.co.uk)) in Ruse. You will also find plenty of British estate agents' offices in Bulgaria, especially in Varna. For legal advice and information on mortgages, visit the UK-run **Bulgarian Home Loans** ([www.bulgarianhomeloans.com](http://www.bulgarianhomeloans.com)).

There are also a number of informative books on the market: try *Buying a Property in Bulgaria* (2007) by Andy Anderson and Stephane Lambert or the similarly titled *Buying a Property in Bulgaria* (2005) by Jonathan White.

### Private Rooms

As well as being a cheap accommodation option for foreign visitors, private rooms also offer a glimpse into real Bulgarian life. Standards vary, but usually these will be in nondescript apartment blocks with shared bathroom facilities. The hosts always seem to be elderly ladies, who are unlikely to speak English. Most are very welcoming and will provide breakfast and lengthy monologues in Bulgarian (whether you understand it or not), while others, of course, are in it purely for the money. If you don't mind sleeping in a room surrounded by kitschy knick-knacks and black-and-white photos of long-dead husbands in military uniform, it's a homely and evocative choice.

Rooms cost anywhere between 10 lv and 25 lv per person, but they're normally priced per number of beds, so people travelling alone sometimes have to pay for double rooms. Rooms in Sofia or Plovdiv will naturally be more expensive than those in small provincial towns and villages, while rooms in popular Black Sea coast towns such as Sozopol can cost up to 30 lv at the height of the summer season. These are often more comfortable, modernised places including private bathrooms but again, each place is different.

Stays in private rooms can often be arranged through an accommodation agency in a town centre, or at a bus or train station. Alternatively, you can wait to be approached in the street or keep an eye out for relevant

signs in Bulgarian (see p309), English or German in shop windows or outside the actual home. The pensioners who hang around outside bus and train stations offering rooms in their homes are invariably living on very low incomes, so by paying them directly, without the commissions taken off by agencies, you will have the satisfaction of knowing that you're helping them get by and making a positive contribution to this form of sustainable tourism.

It's always important to find out where the rooms are before making a decision: in a village such as Melnik, all homes are central, but in a city such as Burgas the home may be in an outlying and dreary suburb.

### ACTIVITIES

All kinds of outdoor activities are catered for in Bulgaria, with hiking, biking, mountaineering, rock-climbing, diving and skiing being just some of the sports and pastimes available. The country is being promoted as a growing ski destination, with new resorts being built in the Pirin mountains, while the country's unspoilt, mountainous terrain makes it ideal for trekking and hiking, with numerous well-marked trails and a system of mountain huts, or *hizhas*, for hikers to sleep in. Water sports are popular on the Black Sea coast, although these tend to be confined to the big package-holiday resorts. Windsurfing, paragliding, scuba diving and a host of other watery activities can be arranged during summer.

For more information and listings, see p75.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Normally, government offices are open on weekdays (Monday to Friday) between 9am and 5pm, but they often close for around an hour between noon and 2pm. Private businesses more or less keep the same hours, but rarely have time for a leisurely lunch break. Most shops are open from about 9am to 7pm on weekdays, and from 9am to 1pm on weekends. Some operate shorter hours on Sunday (or close altogether) but shops in big cities such as Sofia and Plovdiv are often open later on weekends. Post offices are open weekdays from 8am to 6pm, and banks operate from 9am to 4pm weekdays. Some of the foreign exchange offices are open 24 hours but most operate between about 9am and 6pm, Monday to Saturday.

Restaurants generally open from 11am to 11pm. Frustratingly, many museums and tourist attractions, even those in major cities, close for one or two days a week, usually between Sunday and Tuesday (they often also close for lunch). Opening times do change regularly, so don't be surprised if a museum or art gallery is closed even though it should be open.

### CHILDREN

Successful travel with young children requires planning and effort. Don't try to overdo things: even for adults, packing too much into the time available can cause problems. Make sure planned activities include the kids as well – balance the morning at a stuffy museum with an afternoon swim at the beach or a walk in the hills. And include children in the trip planning: if they've helped to work out where you'll be going, they'll be much more interested when they get there. For further general information and suggestions, try Lonely Planet's *Travel with Children* or get advice from other parents on the 'Kids to Go' branch of the Thorn Tree forum ([www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree)).

### Practicalities

Bulgaria is a safe and healthy country and medical facilities are generally pretty good. Most of the necessities for travelling with toddlers, such as nappies (diapers), baby food and fresh or powdered milk are readily available, and there are well-known international fast-food outlets all over the country.

The major international car rental firms can provide children's safety seats for a nominal extra cost, but it's essential to book these in advance. It's also worth noting that highchairs are almost unheard of in restaurants, public nappy-changing facilities are rare and childcare (baby-sitting) agencies are only common among the expatriate community in Sofia. However, some top-end hotels may offer this service, and the bigger hotels in the Black Sea resorts often have playgroups and kids' clubs. Breast-feeding in public is not usual and may attract stares. Cots are available only in the top-end, international chain hotels, though it's always worth asking at other modern hotels. Look out for other travellers with children and see if you can pick up some useful tips.

### Sights & Activities

The most obvious attractions for young children are, of course, the long sandy beaches of the Black Sea, and the water parks, amusement rides and so on offered by the big resorts such as Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi; p247), Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag; p235) and Albena (p249). Other activities such as parasailing and horse riding are often available. The kids might also like to visit some of the zoo parks (though the conditions are often poor and the animals look forlorn), see Bulgaria's rich wildlife in the nature parks and reserves around the country, or explore the dramatic fortresses and ruins that pepper the countryside. All towns and cities have parks with playground equipment. There are also many companies offering activities such as biking, hiking and horse riding trips that are suitable for older children (p75).

### CLIMATE CHARTS

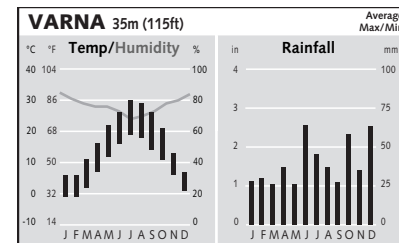
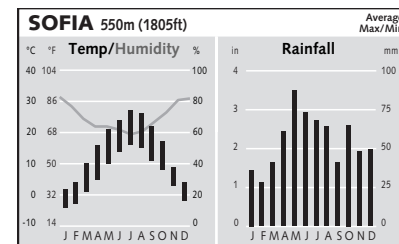
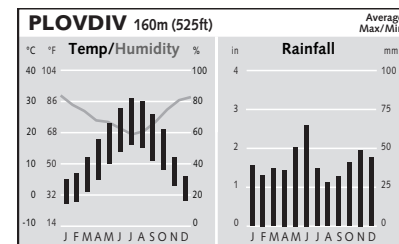
Bulgaria enjoys a temperate climate with hot, dry summers and cold, wet winters, often with heavy snow. Southern Bulgaria and the Black Sea coast record the highest temperatures, with Sandanski (p131) often named the sunniest and hottest town in the country; Smolyan (p158), the highest town in the country, is one of the coolest, as you'd expect. The Danube plain, meanwhile, is subject to the extremes of central Europe. Sofia's climate is generally favourable, with average daytime highs of around 28°C in July and August and 3°C from December to February. Rainfall is highest in the mountains and rural life is often disrupted in winter by huge snowfalls. See p16 for further details.

### COURSES

There are a few language courses that are offered to foreigners, but make sure you book them before you arrive in Bulgaria.

**Sofia University** (Map p88; ☎ 02-971 7162; [www.deo.uni-sofia.bg](http://www.deo.uni-sofia.bg); bul Tsar Osvoboditel) offers Bulgarian language courses for foreigners, with one-to-one courses costing 220 lv for 20 hours' tuition. The university also runs classes in Bulgarian culture, dance and folklore: a two-week course costs 430 lv. Unfortunately, shorter courses are not available.

The **Sts Cyril & Methodius University of Veliko Tárnovo** (☎ 062-20 070; [www.uni-vt.bg](http://www.uni-vt.bg)) usually offers a one-month 'International Summer Seminar for Students in Bulgarian Language and Slavic Culture' every August. Contact the university for current programmes and costs.



### CUSTOMS

Whether you're inspected by customs officers depends on how you enter the country but bona fide tourists are generally left alone. If you're travelling between Bulgaria and another EU country, then normal EU rules on what you can import or export apply. You are allowed to bring into Bulgaria gifts up to the value of €175, plus up to 200 cigarettes, 50 cigars, 1L of spirits, 2L of wine and 50ml of perfume. If you enter or leave the country with more than 8000 lv on you (in any currency), you must declare it. Check with the customs service in your home country for advice on what you can import duty-free from Bulgaria.

For information about exporting unusual items (such as valuable archaeological artefacts) by air, contact the customs authorities at **Sofia airport** (☎ 02-717 051) or **Varna airport** (☎ 052-225 532).

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Bulgaria is a modern, peaceful and well-ordered country. If you can handle yourself in the big cities of Western Europe, North America or Australia, you'll certainly have little or no trouble dealing with the seamier sides of Bulgaria. You'll be fine if you look purposeful, keep alert and take the usual safety precautions.

Theft is not as much of a problem as it is in some countries, but obviously look after your belongings and watch out for pickpockets in busy markets and on crowded buses. Prime targets for thieves are parked cars, especially those with foreign licence plates and/or rental-agency stickers. Never leave things inside the car; always lock them in the boot, or take them with you.

Bulgarian drivers can be extremely reckless at times, and pedestrians should be very careful when crossing roads, especially in Sofia. Cars regularly park on pavements, blocking them for pedestrians. Inevitably, footpaths in towns throughout Bulgaria are often crumbling and under sporadic repair.

Beggars ply their trade around some churches and larger squares, but most are in real need and are very rarely aggressive or demanding. Be wary, however, of gangs of children who work the streets of big cities such as Sofia and Varna: they're often professional pickpockets.

Bulgaria has very harsh drug laws, being a common route for drugs (and arms) smuggled in from Turkey, Russia and Armenia and then across the continent. Don't attempt to buy, sell, transport or use drugs here unless you want an extended stay in Bulgaria's fearsome prisons.

Foreigners are sometimes set up for minor monetary rip-offs, but these are fairly obvious and easy to avoid: taxi drivers at airports, train stations and beach resorts normally overcharge outrageously, and moneychangers on the street sometimes offer ridiculously high exchange rates. (Changing money on the street is both illegal and unnecessary.)

Bulgaria is a major producer of tobacco, and smoking seems to be the national pastime. Cafés, bars and restaurants are often poorly ventilated, but this is less of a problem in summer when most patrons sit outside.

Construction work along the Black Sea shows no sign of slowing down and many places currently resemble vast, dusty building sites. New hotel and holiday-home developments are springing up at various locations –

though the area around Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) accounts for around a third of activity – and concrete and cranes dominate some existing resorts such as Sveti Vlas and parts of Pomorie. The ski resort of Bansko is also undergoing major building development. It's not easy to know when current work will be finished and where new projects are about to begin, but by law construction should not be taking place during the peak tourist seasons. For now, if you want to avoid the mess completely, you'll need to scout around for somewhere more to your liking; there are still quiet nooks to be found.

Mosquitoes can be an irritant in some areas during the summer, but sprays, creams and plug-in repellents can be bought cheaply at pharmacies and supermarkets.

## Security

To keep money, passports etc safe from pickpockets, the best place is out of sight under your clothes. It's easy to make a cloth pouch that hangs around your neck or waist or is pinned under clothing. Alternatively, buy a money belt. Other methods include belts with concealed compartments and pouches worn around the leg. Try not to keep everything in one place; keep small change and a few banknotes in a shirt pocket to pay for bus tickets and small expenses without having to extract wads of cash from a secret hiding place. It may also help if you distribute valuables about your person and baggage, especially if you must carry all your belongings at once.

All important documents (eg passport data page and visa page, credit cards, travel insurance policy, air/bus/train tickets, driving licence) should be photocopied before you leave home. Leave one copy with someone at home and keep another with you, separate from the originals.

## DISABLED TRAVELLERS

Unfortunately, Bulgaria is not an easy destination for disabled travellers. Uneven and broken footpaths make wheelchair mobility problematic, and ramps and special toilets for those in a wheelchair are few and far between, other than in a handful of top-end hotels in Sofia and other big cities. In accordance with EU guidelines, the Bulgarian government plans to upgrade wheelchair access in some existing buildings and make it compulsory for many new public structures, but this is

still a long way from fruition. One Bulgarian organisation involved with disabled locals that is possibly worth contacting is the **Center for Independent Living in Sofia** (☎ 02-983 3117; www.cil-bg.org). You can also get advice and plan your trip with the help of the 'Travellers with Disabilities' branch of the Thorn Tree forum (www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree).

## DISCOUNT CARDS

The International Student Identification Card (ISIC) is available to full-time students of any age, and the International Youth Travel Card (IYTC) is available to anyone under 26 years of age. In Bulgaria, holders of either card can obtain discounts of 10% to 20% at museums, some major attractions, hotels and hostels and some medical and dental clinics, as well as at a few restaurants. Selected travel agencies also offer card holders discounts of up to 50% off domestic flights and 10% off train and bus tickets (depending on the agency and time of year). Cards may be purchased from branches of the **Usit Colours youth travel agency** (www.usitcolours.bg in Bulgarian), which should have lists (in Bulgarian only) of places that accept the card around the country. More general information about these cards is available on the website www.isic.org.

An International Teacher Identity Card (ITIC), identifying the holder as a teacher or professor, also offers similar discounts. More general information about this card is available on the website www.istc.org.

Many places in Bulgaria that should accept these cards don't advertise the fact, so it's always worth asking at the entrance (as long as you have the right card).

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

**Australia** (Map p84; ☎ 02-946 1334; www.ausemb.gr; ul Trakia 37, Sofia)

**Canada** (Map p88; ☎ 02-969 9710; consular@canada-bg.org; ul Moskovska 9, Sofia)

**France** (Map p84; ☎ 02-965 1100; www.ambafrance-bg.org; ul Oborishte 27-29, Sofia)

**Germany** (Map p84; ☎ 02-918 380; www.sofia.diplo.de; ul Frederic Joliot-Curie 25, Sofia)

**Greece** Plovdiv (Map p140; ☎ 032-632.003; ul Preslav 10); Sofia (Map p88; ☎ 02-946 1027; http://info.greek-embassy-sofia.org; ul San Stefano 33; ☎ 9am-noon Mon-Fri)

**Ireland** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 3425; info@embassyofireland.bg; ul Bacho Kiro 26-28, Sofia)

**Macedonia** (Map p84; ☎ 02-870 5098; ul Frederic Joliot-Curie 17, Sofia; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri)

**Netherlands** (Map p88; ☎ 02-816 0300; www.netherlandsembassy.bg; ul Oborishte 15, Sofia)

**Romania** (Map p84; ☎ 02-973 3081; ambsofro@vip.bg; bul Sitnyakovo 4, Sofia; ☎ 3-5pm Tue, 10am-noon Wed & Thu)

**Serbia** (Map p84; ☎ 02-946 1633; www.emb-serbia.com; ul Veliko Tarnovo 3, Sofia)

**Turkey** Burgas (Map p216; ☎ 056-844 2718; tcburkon@bse.bg; bul Demokratsiya 38); Plovdiv (Map p140; ☎ 032-239 010; tcbk\_filibe@plovdiv.ttm.bg; Filip Make-donski 10); Sofia (Map p88; ☎ 02-935 5500, 980 2270; turkel@techno-link.com; bul Vasil Levski 80)

**UK** (Map p88; ☎ 02-933 9222; www.british-embassy.bg; ul Moskovska 9, Sofia)

**USA** (Map p84; ☎ 02-937 5100; www.usembassy.bg; ul Kozyak 16, Sofia)

There is no New Zealand embassy in Bulgaria; in emergencies, citizens should contact the **New Zealand Mission to the EU** in Belgium (☎ 32 2 512 1040; nzemb.brussels@skynet.be; 7th fl, Square de Meeu's 1, Brussels).

## FOOD

Eating out in Bulgaria is remarkably cheap, at least for Western travellers, and even if you're on a tight budget you'll have no problem eating well. In this book we've simply divided eating options into restaurants, where prices range from around 5 lv to 15 lv; cafés, where you're unlikely to spend more than 3 lv to 4 lv; and quick eats, which are the cheapest of all at around 2 lv to 3 lv. For more information on local cuisine and beverages, see p55.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Homosexuality is legal in Bulgaria, and the age of consent is 16, the same as for heterosexuals. Although Bulgaria has not experienced the aggressive homophobia seen in some other Eastern European countries in recent years, it does remain a very conservative society. Same-sex couples should refrain from overt displays of affection and be discreet when booking into hotel rooms. A few gay clubs and bars can be found in Sofia and a couple of other major cities, although most attract a mixed crowd and there are no venues specifically aimed at lesbians. Attitudes are slowly changing, however. In 2006, Sofia hosted the first ever 'Mr Gay Balkans' competition, while Varna celebrated 'Gay Week' in September 2007.

The website www.gayguidebg.com is a comprehensive source of information, in English, on all aspects of gay (male) life in Bulgaria,

including details of gay-friendly bars, nightclubs and other businesses. Gay women can find some information at [www.bg-lesbian.com](http://www.bg-lesbian.com). The major gay association is the **Bulgarian Gay Organization Gemini** (☎ 02-987 6872; [www.bgogemini.org](http://www.bgogemini.org)). Contact the group about current gay and gay-friendly bars and nightclubs in Sofia.

The *Spartacus International Gay Guide* by Bruno Gmünder is the best male-only international directory of gay entertainment venues in Europe. Lesbians should look out for *Damron's Women's Traveller* by Bob Damron. For the latest on the gay scene in Bulgaria, check out the 'Gay & Lesbian Travellers' branch of the Thorn Tree forum ([www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree)).

## HOLIDAYS

During official public holidays all government offices, banks, post offices and major businesses will be closed. All hotels, restaurants, bars, national parks/reserves and museums stay open (unless the holiday coincides with a normal day off), as do most shops and petrol stations; border crossings and public transport continue to operate normally.

The official public holidays are:

**New Year's Day** (1 January) Banks and other offices often also close on New Year's Eve.

**Liberation Day** (3 March) Celebrates Bulgaria's independence after the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78); also known as National Day.

**Easter** (March/April) Orthodox Easter falls one week after Catholic/Protestant Easter.

**St George's Day** (6 May) Celebrates the start of the livestock breeding cycle.

**Cyrillic Alphabet Day** (24 May) Also known as Day of Bulgarian Culture.

**Unification Day** (6 September) Celebrates the final reunification of Bulgaria in 1885.

**Bulgarian Independence Day** (22 September)

Celebrates official independence from Turkey in 1908.

**National Revival Day** (1 November) Celebrates the Bulgarian National Revival of the 19th century.

**Christmas** (25 and 26 December) During the communist era, Christmas Day was outlawed, so it was often celebrated on 26 December instead.

## INSURANCE

A travel insurance policy to cover theft, loss and medical problems is a sensible idea. Some policies offer lower and higher medical-expense options. There is a wide variety of policies available, so check the small print.

Some policies specifically exclude 'dangerous activities', which can include scuba diving,

motorcycling and even trekking. A locally acquired motorcycle licence is not valid under some policies.

You may prefer a policy that pays doctors or hospitals directly rather than you having to pay on the spot and claim later. If you have to claim later, make sure you keep all documentation. Some policies ask you to call back (via reverse charges) to a centre in your home country where an immediate assessment of your problem can be made.

Check that the policy covers ambulances as well as an emergency flight home.

To buy an insurance policy online, visit [www.lonelyplanet.com/bookings/insurance](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/bookings/insurance). For car insurance, see p302.

## INTERNET ACCESS

Bulgaria is now well and truly 'connected', and even the smallest town has at least one internet centre. With about 150 internet service providers throughout the country, competition is fierce and access is remarkably cheap, from as little as 0.80 lv per hour, although between 1 lv and 3 lv per hour is more common. Internet centres are usually open daily between about 10am and 9pm, sometimes later. Look for places with the word 'café' or 'centre' (often in English) rather than anywhere with the word 'games', because these latter places are usually cramped, smoky bunkers where teenage boys endlessly play violent and deafening computer games. Bulgarian Telecommunications Company (BTC) centres offer the most reliable and speedy connections, while the more modern, privately run internet cafés are usually pretty good. However, in older places, especially away from the big cities, connections tend to be painfully slow.

Most top-end hotels in cities such as Sofia, Varna and Plovdiv will provide modem connections for laptops in the room; elsewhere you may be able to plug into the regular phone socket, but this is by no means certain. Some internet centres may allow you to hook up your laptop, but don't count on it.

For internet resources, see p20.

## LEGAL MATTERS

Bulgaria is a member state of the EU and more or less follows the same legal system as most of the rest of Europe. The days of blatant ripping off of foreign travellers are long gone; traffic police have to abide by a certain code of ethics, but residents do complain bitterly about corruption within some government

departments, especially customs. If you do get into serious trouble with the police, it's best to contact your embassy (see p287).

## MAPS

Good maps are easy to find in Bulgaria, but you might want to buy one or two before you come. For a useful overview of the region, buy Geocenter's *Eastern Europe* (1:2,000,000) map. The *Baedeker Bulgaria* (1:750,000) map and Bartholomew's *Bulgaria* (1:750,000) map will probably be available in your home country.

Proper road maps are essential if you're driving around Bulgaria. One of the best is the *Bulgaria Road Map* (1:500,000), published in English by Kartografia (with a red cover). Slightly better is *Bulgaria* (1:530,000), published in English by Datamap (with a blue cover). It's colourful, detailed and has several city maps on the other side. A smaller version (1:760,000), published in Cyrillic, has a red cover. These maps are readily available all over Bulgaria.

The maps in this guidebook will probably be more than sufficient for most visitors, but detailed maps (often in Cyrillic) are available in Bulgaria for most cities, towns and major attractions. Undoubtedly, the best publisher is Domino. It offers maps (usually with a red cover) of Bansko, Burgas, Blagoevgrad, Gabrovo, Haskovo, Kazanlak, Koprivshtitsa, Melnik, Veliko Târnovo, Plevn, Plovdiv, Ruse, Sandanski, Smolyan, Sofia, Stara Zagora, Varna and Vidin. Most maps list street names in Cyrillic (which can be handy for linking maps with street signs), provide keys in Bulgarian and English and include other towns and places in the region. Another respected map publisher is Datamap, which produces an excellent country map as well as some city maps in English.

Also available in Bulgaria is a range of other maps for areas along the Black Sea coast and for hiking. If you are going to do some serious hiking, you will definitely need a detailed map. In Sofia, the best place to find these is **Zig Zag Holidays** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 5102; [www.zigzagbg.com](http://www.zigzagbg.com); bul Stamboliyski 20-V), while elsewhere, local travel agencies or tourist information centres are your best bet. Other detailed and useful maps, which are not always easy to find, include *The Monasteries in Bulgaria*, published by Kartografia in Cyrillic, and *Wine Map Bulgaria*, published in English by Bars Agency.

## MONEY

The local currency is the lev (plural: leva), comprised of 100 stotinki. It is almost always abbreviated to lv. The lev is a stable currency; see inside the front cover for the conversion rates of several major currencies at the time of research. For major purchases such as organised tours, airfares, car rental and midrange and top-end hotels, prices are almost always quoted by staff in euros, although payment is possible in leva too. (Bulgaria has no immediate plans to adopt the Euro as its national currency.) While some budget hotels and private rooms may quote their rates in euros, payments should be made in leva. The rates given in this book are in the currency stated by individual establishments; normally the leva price will simply be twice the given euro price (eg €10 = 20 lv), though some places may work out the precise exchange rate. All other transactions in Bulgaria are in leva and listed as such in this book.

See p17 for more information.

## ATMs

ATMs that accept major credit cards (ie Cirrus, Maestro, JCB, Visa, MasterCard and American Express) are an increasingly common sight and can now be found in all sizeable towns and cities. It's best to use credit cards as a backup for cash in case an ATM swallows your card (more likely if the card is issued outside Europe). Otherwise, bring two or three different cards. Also, before you leave home check with your bank about exchange rates (which, of course, usually work out in their favour) and commissions (which can be about 2%). The total amount you can withdraw depends on how much your bank will allow and on how much is in your account; the maximum allowed per day by most Bulgarian banks is usually 200 lv.

## Black Market

With the currency stabilisation, no black market exists in Bulgaria. Foreigners may still be approached (especially in Sofia or Varna) and asked to change money, but this is illegal and there's a high chance you'll be given counterfeit leva, short-changed or robbed.

## Cash

Bulgarian banknotes come in denominations of 2, 5, 10, 20 and 50 leva. Coins come in 1, 2, 5, 10, 20 and 50 stotinki and 1 lev. Prices for

smaller items are always quoted in leva or a fraction of a lev, eg on a bus ticket the fare will be listed as '0.50 lv' rather than '50 stotinki'.

When changing money, make sure that the foreign banknotes you have are not torn, marked or grubby, otherwise they may be refused or you may even be given a lower rate (without being told so in advance). Always make absolutely sure of the precise sum in leva you will receive before handing over any of your cash. Similarly, make sure that any leva given to you are not torn or marked. Foreigners may export and import up to 8000 lv (in any currency) without restrictions.

### Credit Cards

Credit cards are still not as common or reliable in Bulgaria as in Western Europe, and their acceptance is decidedly uneven: you may be able to use your card for a 20 lv restaurant meal but have to hand over a wad of banknotes for a 200 lv hotel bill. However, American Express, Visa and MasterCard are gaining ground and can often be used at up-market restaurants, souvenir shops, top-end hotels, car rental firms and travel agencies, but rarely anywhere else – despite signs indicating acceptance of credit cards. You cannot rely on using a credit card exclusively in Bulgaria; use it to get cash from banks and for major purchases only. Some places, particularly the more expensive hotels, will add a 5% surcharge to your bill if you use a credit card.

If no ATM is available, or you're worried about using one (in case it swallows your card), some larger branches of major banks will provide cash advances in leva over the counter; this service is also sometimes offered by foreign exchange offices. The fee is usually about 4% and you'll probably also be charged fees and commissions by your bank. The maximum withdrawal allowed for cash advances depends on what is determined by your bank.

### International Transfers

Telegraphic transfers are not that expensive but they can be quite slow through a bank. Having money wired through American Express, MoneyGram or Western Union is fairly straightforward and faster than a bank (funds are sometimes available in less than one day). You should have the sender's full name, the exact amount and reference number and your passport; the money can be collected in

euros or leva. The sender pays the fee, which can range from 5% to 15%.

### Moneychangers

The currencies listed inside the front cover can be changed at any of the plethora of foreign exchange offices in every city and town and at major attractions. Most don't charge commission or fees, but some do – despite signs to the contrary on notice boards outside – so always check the final amount that you will be offered before handing over your cash.

The best currencies to take are euros, pounds sterling and US dollars. You may have trouble changing less familiar currencies, such as Australian or Canadian dollars, but you should be able to find somewhere in a city such as Sofia, Plovdiv or Varna that will accept most major international currencies.

Foreign exchange offices can generally be recognised by the huge 'exchange' signs, almost always written in English. Current rates are always displayed prominently, often on notice boards outside. These offices are normally open between about 9am and 6pm, Monday to Saturday, but offices in the centre of cities and larger towns are often open every day.

It's also easy to change cash at most of the larger banks found in cities and major towns; these include the United Bulgarian Bank, Unicredit Bulbank, Bulgarian Post Bank, Raffeisen Bank and Biochim Commercial Bank. The exchange rates listed on the electronic boards in bank windows may offer slightly higher rates than foreign exchange offices, but many banks charge commission. The other disadvantages with banks are that they're only open between 9am and 4pm from Monday to Friday, and queues can be long.

The lev is freely convertible, so there should be no problems changing excess leva back into sterling, dollars or other major foreign currencies. However, some readers have reported difficulties trying to change leva for local currency in other Eastern European countries.

### Taxes

The value-added tax (VAT) of 20% is included in all prices quoted in Bulgaria, and is included in all prices listed in this guidebook. Some restaurants add service charges of 10%, and some top-end hotels list pre-VAT prices.

### Tippling & Bargaining

Waiters normally round restaurant bills up to the nearest convenient figure and pocket the difference; the same applies to taxi drivers. In some restaurants an 8% to 10% service charge is already added, although this doesn't always stop the waiters from rounding up the bill again, or hovering expectantly for an extra tip. If it's not been added, and the service is good, add about 10%. Always leave the tip on the table (but make sure no beggars or street kids are within sight if you're sitting outside): it's socially unacceptable to give a tip to the waiter by hand.

Haggling is not customary in Bulgaria. An exception is at the seaside resorts where taxi drivers and landlords of private rooms habitually inflate prices for foreigners.

### Travellers Cheques

Travellers cheques are not as easily convertible as cash, nor as convenient as credit cards, but they are a safe way of carrying money. The downside is that not all foreign exchange offices and banks will change travellers cheques, and those that do sometimes accept only American Express and Thomas Cook, with commission rates of 3% to 5%, so if you need to change travellers cheques, always look around for the best exchange rates. Some larger banks, such as the Unicredit Bulbank in Sofia, will change travellers cheques in US dollars into cash for a fee of about 2% to 3%.

Guaranteed personal cheques are another way of carrying money or obtaining cash. Eurocheques, available to European bank account holders, are guaranteed up to a certain limit. When cashing them, you'll be asked to show your Eurocheque card bearing your signature and registration number, and perhaps a passport or ID card. Many hotels and merchants in Bulgaria refuse to accept Eurocheques, however, because of the relatively large commissions involved.

### PHOTOGRAPHY & VIDEO Film & Equipment

Bulgaria is an extremely photogenic country, so bring (or buy along the way) plenty of film or a couple of memory cards if you're using a digital camera. Photographic and video film and equipment are available everywhere but, obviously, shops in the larger cities and towns have a wider selection, and everything for sale near tourist sites is overpriced. As an example of standard prices, a roll of 24- or 36-print

film from a photographic shop in Sofia or Plovdiv costs about 5 lv to 8 lv. Developing costs are about 0.50 lv per print, more for larger prints or faster service. Slide film is not easy to find, so bring your own.

If you're using a digital camera, check that it has enough memory to store your snaps; two 128MB cards will probably be enough. Digital memory cards are widely available and prices vary. A 128MB card will cost roughly 20 lv to 30 lv. If you do run out of memory space your best bet is to burn your photos onto a CD-ROM. Increasing numbers of processing labs and some of the more modern internet cafés in the big cities now offer this service.

To download your pics at an internet café you'll need a USB cable and a card reader. Some places provide a USB cable on request, but be warned that many of the bigger chain cafés don't let you plug your gear into their computers, meaning that it's back to plan A – the CD-ROM.

Anyone serious about taking great snaps should pick up *Travel Photography*, published by Lonely Planet.

### Restrictions

Taking pictures of anything in Bulgaria that might be considered of strategic importance, such as military camps and border crossings, is not advisable. These days officials are much less paranoid about photography than they used to be, but use common sense when it comes to this issue. It's best to ask permission before taking close-up photos of people.

### POST

The standard cost of sending a postcard is 0.35 lv within Bulgaria, while a letter costs 0.55 lv. Postcards and letters weighing up to 20g cost 1 lv to elsewhere in Europe and 1.40 lv to the rest of the world.

To send a parcel from Bulgaria, you usually have to take it unwrapped to a main post office. Anything heavier than 2kg must often be taken to a special customs post office (ask at the post office for information).

### SHOPPING

It's easy to spend lots of money on souvenirs but – not surprisingly – most of the stuff at popular tourist spots (such as resorts along the Black Sea coast) is tacky and overpriced. For more information about Bulgarian handicrafts such as woodcarving and weaving, see p53.

### UNUSUAL SOUVENIRS

If you're looking for a souvenir of your time among the Bulgars and garish trinket boxes and amateur daubs of twee, timber-framed houses just won't do, there are plenty of more tasteful mementos for you to pick up. Hand-painted icons make a particularly evocative reminder of your stay; though often expensive, they do involve a huge amount of skill and time. How about a patterned *cherga*? These traditional, hand-woven rugs make a colourful addition to any room and, again, involve a great deal of work: even small rugs can take months to complete. Troyanska kapka pottery is common, but one of the more unusual products is a jug and set of shallow cups made specifically for serving and drinking the potent national spirit, *rakia* – it's sure to make a decorative conversation piece!

If you're here in March, see if you can find a *martenitza*. These little red-and-white woollen tassels, often in the form of a man and a woman, are worn by women and children on the breast or wrist (traditionally, men wear them tied round their left ankle or inside their left shoe) and tied to fruit trees at the first signs of spring, usually the first sighting of storks or migrating swallows.

Folding horn-handled knives, traditionally used by shepherds, are also good buys; get them straight from the blacksmith at Etăr (p187). Hand-knitted woollen socks from Bansko make useful and cosy mementos.

Foodstuffs worth bringing back include the widely used local seasoning Balkanska Sharena Sol (Balkan Mixed Salt), rose-petal jam, herbal tea bags and, of course, a good bottle of *rakia* or Bulgarian wine – try the 'national' red-grape variety, Rubin.

Some of the more attractive, and usable, mementos of your trip to Bulgaria may include pieces of Troyanska kapka pottery, decorated with the traditional *kapka* (droplet) design. Plates, bowls, cups, wine goblets and sugar bowls, among other things, are widely available. Most of these items are still made for everyday use, not just as tourist trinkets, so try looking in markets rather than pricier souvenir shops. Other worthwhile keepsakes include embroideries from Nesebăr, Varna and Sofia; paintings of traditional village life or landscapes from Varna, Nesebăr, Sofia and Plovdiv; woodcarvings from Tryavna; or carpets, rugs and bags from Koprivshitsa, Chiprovtsi and Kotel. The National Fair and Exhibition of Arts & Crafts Complex (p191) in Oreshak is a marvellous place to spend up big on embroidery, pottery, ceramics, weaving, woodcarving and metalwork. The Etăr Ethnographic Village Museum (p187) near Gabrovo is a fantastic place to find traditional handmade crafts such as pottery, woodwork, metalwork and textiles.

As the regional centre for the Valley of Roses, Kazanlāk is the place to buy rose oil, perfume, shampoo, liqueur, tea bags and jam, though you can also pick these things up in Sofia and elsewhere. For antiques, head to the old towns in Veliko Tărnovo and Plovdiv, but don't expect any bargains. The best range of other souvenirs such as books, CDs, textiles and jewellery is in Sofia.

Compact discs of foreign music are usually made outside Bulgaria and tend to be expensive, but CDs of Bulgarian music often cost only about 13 lv. Cassettes and CDs are available throughout the country, but the range is particularly extensive in Sofia and Plovdiv.

Note that counterfeit goods are common in Bulgaria, ranging from knock-off watches and fake perfumes sold at street stalls in places such as Nesebăr, Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasătsi) and Sunny Beach (Slănchev Bryag) to fake designer clothes and pirated software on sale in markets all over the country. Most of this is pretty obvious and priced accordingly, while some items can be quite expensive and may be designed to deceive. Be careful, too, when dealing with 'antiques', especially at street stalls in such places as Sofia. As always, use your common sense and make sure you know what you're buying; most of the time, those 'ancient coins' and Nazi knick-knacks are not the real thing.

### SOLO TRAVELLERS

Solo travellers should face no specific problems in Bulgaria, other than the perennial annoyance of often having to pay for a double room in hotels, or facing the obvious disappointment of waiters in swankier restaurants when you ask for a 'table for one'. Private rooms and budget hotels are more likely to offer single prices, although it's

always worth asking for discounts elsewhere, especially on weekends.

Macho culture prevails in Bulgaria, so women travelling alone may attract unwelcome attention, especially outside the big cities and resorts, where foreigners are more of a novelty, and in bars and clubs anywhere (see p295). Single men may be approached by pimps and prostitutes, some of whom can be aggressive in big cities such as Sofia and Varna.

Although solo independent travellers (other than business travellers) aren't that common a sight, numbers are increasing. Hostels in Sofia are the best places to meet like-minded fellow travellers, while renting rooms in private houses or sharing tables in busy restaurants are great ways to get to meet some of the locals on their home patch. Learning a few words of Bulgarian will help break the ice, too.

### TELEPHONE

From Bulgaria it's easy to telephone anywhere in the world, via public telephone booths, telephone centres, private homes and hotels.

The two public telephone operators are Bulfon, with its orange booths, and the slightly more up-to-date Mobika, which has blue booths. Nearly all now only take phonecards, and some Mobika booths also accept Visa and MasterCard for long-distance calls (and have instructions in English). Cards for each system, ranging in price from 5 lv to 25 lv, can be bought at kiosks and in some shops.

Every big town throughout the country has a Bulgarian Telecommunications Company (BTC) centre, normally inside or very near to the main post office. BTC centres are normally open from at least 8am to 6pm daily, and often 24 hours a day in larger towns. Making a local or long-distance call at a BTC centre is simple: choose a booth (or take a token indicating which booth to use), call the number and pay the amount displayed on the counter above the telephone. BTC centres will normally have fax and internet facilities as well.

To ring Bulgaria from abroad, dial the international access code (which varies from country to country), add 359 (the country code for Bulgaria), the area code (minus the first zero) and then the number.

As the telecommunications systems in rural areas are being upgraded, some numbers will change, often with the addition of digits to the beginning of the number. If any numbers listed in this guidebook do

not work, check the telephone directory (mostly written in Bulgarian and English) or ring one of the inquiry numbers listed here. These numbers can be dialled toll-free anywhere within Bulgaria and there's a good chance one of the operators will speak English.

**International directory inquiries** (☎ 124)

**International operator** (☎ 0123)

**National directory inquiries – businesses** (☎ 144)

**National directory inquiries – residential** (☎ 145)

**National operator** (☎ 121)

### Mobile Phones

Mobile (cell) phones have taken off in Bulgaria and are common pretty much everywhere in the country. Mobile telephone numbers have different codes (eg 087, 088 or 089) and are indicated by the abbreviations 'GSM' or 'mob'. Bulgaria has three mobile service providers – **Globul** (www.globul.bg), **M-Tel** (www.mtel.bg) and **Vivatel** (www.vivatel.bg) – who cover most of the country, but contact your own mobile phone company about whether you can use your own phone in Bulgaria.

### TIME

Bulgaria is on Eastern European Time, ie GMT/UTC plus two hours, except during daylight saving, when clocks are put forward by one hour between the last Sunday in March and the last Sunday in October. There are no time zones within the country.

Bulgaria is one hour behind Serbia and Macedonia, and the same time as Romania, Greece and Turkey. Therefore, if it's noon in Sofia, it's 2am in Los Angeles, 5am in New York, 10am in London, 11am in Paris and 8pm in Sydney, not taking into account daylight saving (where applicable) in these countries. The 24-hour clock is commonly used throughout Bulgaria, and always utilised for bus and train timetables.

### TOILETS

With the exception of a few Middle Eastern-style squat toilets near the Turkish border, almost all toilets in Bulgaria are of the sit-down European variety. All hotels provide toilet paper and soap, but these are rarely offered anywhere else. In the more basic hotels and private homes you may still come across old-fashioned toilets that have small bins beside them for used toilet paper (throwing paper

down the toilet may block the pipes), but fortunately these horrors are now becoming rare.

The standard of public toilets, especially at train and bus stations, is generally abominable and you'll be charged at least 0.30 lv per visit (more for a few squares of toilet paper). So if you can't get back to your hotel, visit a museum, classy bar, shopping mall or restaurant. Western fast-food franchises such as McDonald's always have clean toilets with toilet paper and often a queue to use these facilities. More acceptable, privately run toilets are available for about 0.40 lv in central Sofia and the Black Sea resorts.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Despite the large revenue generated by tourism, the increasing popularity of Bulgaria as a tourist destination, and constant pleas from travel agencies and tourist operators, Bulgaria still doesn't have a dedicated Ministry of Tourism. Tourism is the responsibility of the Ministry of Economy and Energy and gets a lower profile than it deserves.

Recently, however, tourist information offices have begun appearing in the big cities. In Sofia, the **National Tourist Information Centre** (Map p88; ☎ 987 9778; www.bulgariatravel.org; ul Sveta Sofia; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is a brand-new tourist office offering free information, brochures and maps, while Burgas, Varna and Plovdiv also have new, helpful tourist centres. In an effort to boost regional tourism, the government has opened a number of autonomous local Tourist Information Centres (TICs) around the country. These TICs, however, are often little more than associations of travel agencies, rather than independent tourist offices dispensing free advice and useful maps. TICs of use to visitors are mentioned throughout this guidebook.

The former government-run tourism monopoly, Balkantourist, has been split up and privatised. The subsequent private agencies now operate under myriad different, though slightly ambiguous, names, such as Balkan Tours, Balkan Airtours and Balkan Holidays. These are essentially travel agencies and *not* tourist offices.

One of the more useful of the new private travel agencies is **Zig Zag Holidays** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia), which can offer plenty of information to foreign travellers.

The **Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 7685; www.baatbg.org; bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia), in the same building as Zig Zag, promotes sustainable alternative tourism across the country.

## VISAS

Citizens of other EU member states and Australia, Canada, Israel, Japan, New Zealand and the USA can stay in Bulgaria visa-free for up to 90 days. Citizens of other countries should check the current requirements with their nearest Bulgarian embassy or consulate (see p287) before their departure. Visas cannot be obtained at border crossings.

## Visa Extensions

At the time of writing, visitors wishing to extend their visit to Bulgaria beyond the 90-day limit have to apply for a residence permit at the **Immigration Office** (Map p88; ☎ 02-982 3764; bul Maria Luisa 48; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri). This is likely to be a time-consuming, bureaucratic nightmare, and nobody here will speak anything but Bulgarian. It's probably far better to contact the Bulgarian Embassy in your own country for advice before you travel if you envisage being in the country for more than three months. The situation, especially for EU citizens, may well change over coming years.

## VOLUNTEERING

If you're looking for a more satisfying holiday and you don't mind a bit of hard work, then there are a number of opportunities for volunteering in Bulgaria. Your first port of call should be **World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms** (WWOOF; www.wwoofbulgaria.org), which now has a presence in Bulgaria and can direct you to current projects and openings for volunteers around the country. The **British Trust for Conservation Volunteers** (www.btcv.org) organises various working holidays in Bulgaria, with recent projects including helping to reintroduce vultures into the wild and building nesting sites for endangered birds.

**St James Park** (☎ 0884595174; www.stjamespark.biz) is a British-run venture in the village of Voditsa in northern Bulgaria. It's an 'alternative' campsite and organic farm that welcomes volunteers, either (through WWOOF) working 35 hours a week for board and lodging, or doing smaller, casual jobs for free meals. Contact them for exact dates and details.

Also worth checking out is the **Greenschool Village** (www.greenschool.cult.bg) in the eastern

Rodopi mountains. This educational project aims to re-create several old-style village houses, and provide local young people with the chance to learn traditional skills and crafts such as pottery and carpentry. It is hoped that this centre will also reinvigorate the local community and the local economy.

For invaluable information and inspiration to get you planning your perfect short or long-term volunteer experience anywhere in the world, visit [www.lonelyplanet.com/volunteer](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/volunteer).

## WOMEN TRAVELLERS

In general, travelling around Bulgaria poses no particular difficulties for women. For the most part, sober men are polite and respectful, especially if you're clearly not interested in their advances, and women can usually meet and communicate with local men without their intentions necessarily being misconstrued. That doesn't mean, however, that women can go into a bar or nightclub unaccompanied and expect to be left alone. If you attract unwanted attention, saying *Omăzhena sâm* ('I am married') gives a pretty firm message; wearing a wedding ring might help, too.

Like most destinations in Eastern Europe, common sense is the best guide to dealing with possibly dangerous situations, such as hitchhiking, sharing hostel rooms and walking alone at night. For overnight train journeys, choose a sleeper compartment rather than a couchette. Young women in Sofia are comfortable wearing miniskirts and low-cut blouses, but more modest apparel is advisable if you're travelling outside the big cities or coastal resorts.

Feminine hygiene products such as tampons are widely available in supermarkets and pharmacies across the country.

Hear what female travellers are saying about Bulgaria on the 'Women Travellers' branch of the Thorn Tree forum ([www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree](http://www.lonelyplanet.com/thorntree)).

## WORK

Since Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, there are no longer any labour restrictions on citizens of other EU countries, but with high levels of domestic unemployment and some of the lowest wages in Europe, Bulgaria isn't going to be the most obvious destination for foreign jobseekers. There are rather more opportunities for entrepreneurs, though, and the government is keen for foreigners to establish businesses as long as most of the staff are Bulgarian. Most foreigners working in Bulgaria are specialists employed by multinational companies. These jobs are most often arranged before arriving in the country.

If you intend to seek employment in Bulgaria, you will need a work visa; contact your local Bulgarian embassy for details. If you do find a temporary job, the pay is likely to be very low. Do it for the experience, rather than the money, and you won't be disappointed. Teaching English is one way to make some extra cash, but the market is often saturated. A helpful website is run by the **Sofia Echo** ([www.sofiaecho.com](http://www.sofiaecho.com)), Bulgaria's main English-language newspaper.

If you arrange a job before you arrive, your employer should plough through the frightening mass of paperwork from relevant government departments and pay the various fees. If you land a job *after* you arrive, or you're considering setting up a business in Bulgaria, contact some expats for current advice about the plethora of required forms and fees.

*Work Your Way Around the World* by Susan Griffith provides practical advice on a wide range of issues. Its publisher, Vacation Work, has many other useful titles, including *The Directory of Summer Jobs Abroad*, edited by David Woodworth. *Working Holidays* by Ben Jupp, published by the Central Bureau for Educational Visits and Exchanges in London, is another good source, as is *Now Hiring! Jobs in Eastern Europe* by Clarke Canfield.



# Transport

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## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### ENTERING THE COUNTRY

Now that Bulgaria is inside the EU, citizens of other EU nations, at least, will face minimal border formalities. Officially, there is still a fairly vague bureaucratic requirement that foreigners register with the police within 48 hours of arrival, but nobody really bothers with this communist-era leftover any more. At hotels, hostels, camping grounds and, sometimes, private homes, staff normally take details from your passport, fill out the registration form (in Cyrillic) and give you a copy. Theoretically, you must then show these forms to immigration officials when you leave. However, you're unlikely to be asked to produce these forms when you leave, but keep hold of a couple, just in case.

Delays are common at border crossings, and customs officials are generally an unfriendly and suspicious lot; expect to be questioned on what business you have coming to Bulgaria and where you intend staying.

### Passport

There are no restrictions on any foreign passport-holders entering Bulgaria, other than the length of time they are allowed to stay. See p294 for details of stamps and visas.

### THINGS CHANGE...

The information in this chapter is particularly vulnerable to change. Check directly with the airline or a travel agent to make sure you understand how a fare (and ticket you may buy) works and be aware of the security requirements for international travel. Shop carefully. The details given in this chapter should be regarded as pointers and are not a substitute for your own careful, up-to-date research.

### AIR

#### Airports & Airlines

The Bulgarian national carrier is **Bulgaria Air** (airline code FB; ☎ 02-937 3370; www.air.bg), operating out of Sofia airport. It has only been in existence since the end of 2002 and has an unblemished safety record. In 2007 it merged with Hemus Air.

The main international airport is **Sofia airport** (☎ 02-937 2211; www.sofia-airport.bg), though some airlines also fly to/from **Varna** (www.varna-airport.bg) and, in summer, to **Burgas** (www.bourgass-airport.com). Plovdiv airport is only used by occasional charter flights, for example bringing some package holidaymakers to the ski resorts.

#### AIRLINES FLYING TO/FROM BULGARIA

Major airlines flying to/from Bulgaria include the following. All offices are in Sofia.

**Aeroflot** (airline code SU; ☎ 943 4489; www.aeroflot.ru) Hub: Moscow airport.

**Aerosvit** (airline code AEW; ☎ 980 7880; www.aerosvit.com) Hub: Kiev airport.

**Air France** (airline code AF; ☎ 939 7010; www.airfrance.com) Hub: Paris airport.

**Alitalia** (airline code AZ; ☎ 981 6702; www.alitalia.it) Hub: Rome Fiumicino airport.

**Austrian Airlines** (airline code OS; ☎ 980 2323; www.aa.com) Hub: Vienna airport.

**British Airways** (airline code BA; ☎ 954 7000; www.britishairways.com) Hub: London Heathrow airport.

**Czech Airlines** (airline code OK; ☎ 981 5408; www.csa.cz) Hub: Prague airport.

**easyJet** (airline code EZY; www.easyjet.com) Hub: London Gatwick airport.

**LOT Polish Airlines** (airline code LO; ☎ 987 4562; www.lot.com) Hub: Warsaw airport.

**Lufthansa Airlines** (airline code LH; ☎ 930 4242; www.lufthansa.com) Hub: Frankfurt airport.

**Malev-Hungarian Airlines** (airline code MA; ☎ 981 5091; www.malev.hu) Hub: Budapest airport.

**Olympic Airlines** (airline code OA; ☎ 981 4545; www.olympicairlines.com) Hub: Athens airport.

**Turkish Airlines** (airline code TK; ☎ 988 3596; www.turkishairlines.com) Hub: Ankara airport.

**Wizz Air** (airline code WZZ; ☎ 960 3888; www.wizzair.com) Hub: Budapest airport.

### Tickets

It pays to shop around for your air tickets, and though they're no substitute for the personal attention and advice you'll get from a travel agent, you're likely to find some of the better deals online, either through the websites of the airlines themselves, or through one of the growing number of dedicated internet flight shops. The following websites are worth a look:

**Bargain Bucket** (www.bargain-bucket.com) Useful links to many other online travel agencies.

**Bulgaria Flights** (www.bulgariaflights.com) Comprehensive dedicated site with cheap flights from many European cities to/from Sofia and Varna.

**Cheap Flights** (www.cheapflights.co.uk)

**ebookers** (www.ebookers.com)

**Flights.com** (www.flights.com, www.tiss.com)

**Lonelyplanet.com** (www.lonelyplanet.com/bookings)

Book flights and rail passes through our recommended travel partners.

**Travelocity** (www.travelocity.com)

Full-time students and people under 26 years (under 30 in some countries) have access to better deals than other travellers. You have to show a document proving your date of birth, or a valid International Student Identity Card (ISIC), when buying your ticket and boarding the plane.

### INTERCONTINENTAL (RTW) TICKETS

If you're flying to Bulgaria from the other side of the world, then round-the-world tickets may be very good value. The best places to look for these are **Star Alliance** (www.staralliance.com) and **One World** (www.oneworld.com). These airline alliances will offer a limited period, usually one year, to travel around the world, stopping off at destinations of your choosing.

Tailor-made round-the-world tickets can also be assembled by travel agents, and there are numerous online agencies that offer good deals; see the following sections for some ideas.

### Australia

There are no airlines that offer direct flights to Bulgaria from Australia, so you'll have to

### CLIMATE CHANGE & TRAVEL

Climate change is a serious threat to the ecosystems that humans rely upon, and air travel is the fastest-growing contributor to the problem. Lonely Planet regards travel, overall, as a global benefit, but believes we all have a responsibility to limit our personal impact on global warming.

#### Flying & Climate Change

Pretty much every form of motorised travel generates CO2 (the main cause of human-induced climate change) but planes are far and away the worst offenders, not just because of the sheer distances they allow us to travel, but because they release greenhouse gases high into the atmosphere. The statistics are frightening: two people taking a return flight between Europe and the US will contribute as much to climate change as an average household's gas and electricity consumption over a whole year.

#### Carbon Offset Schemes

Climatecare.org and other websites use 'carbon calculators' that allow travellers to offset the level of greenhouse gases they are responsible for with financial contributions to sustainable travel schemes that reduce global warming.

Lonely Planet, together with Rough Guides and other concerned partners in the travel industry, supports the carbon offset scheme run by www.climatecare.org. Lonely Planet offsets all of its staff and author travel.

For more information check out our website: lonelyplanet.com.

travel via one or more stopovers in Europe, such as London, Moscow or Frankfurt. Prices vary considerably, depending on the time of year you're travelling and the airline you choose to fly with.

**STA Travel** (☎ 134 782; www.statravel.com.au) offers cheap tickets, and has offices in all major cities and on many university campuses. **Flight Centre** (☎ 13 31 33; www.flightcentre.com.au) also has dozens of offices throughout Australia. **Student Flights** (☎ 1800 046 462; www.studentflights.com.au) is an excellent source for discounted flights, including round-the-world options.

## Canada

Again, there are no direct flights between any Canadian airports and Bulgaria; instead you will need to fly to, say, London, Frankfurt or Rome, and pick up a connection there. **Travel CUTS** (☎ toll-free 1-866 246 9762; www.travelcuts.com) is Canada's national student travel agency and has offices in all major cities. Online, try **Travelocity** (☎ toll-free 877-282 2925; www.travelocity.ca).

## Continental Europe

### BALKANS

Bulgaria Air has five flights a week to Bucharest (one-way/return around €165/260). Olympic Airlines departs regularly from Athens and Bulgaria Air flies five times a week to the Greek capital. Bulgaria Air has one weekly flight to Tirana. Also, Turkish Airlines has regular flights to Sofia from Ankara and Istanbul, with prices from around €200 one way, and Bulgaria Air flies from Sofia to Istanbul.

### FRANCE

Bulgaria Air and Air France both fly between Sofia and Paris daily. **Voyages Wasteels** (☎ 01-55 82 32 33; www.wasteels.fr) has 65 branches across France. For online flight deals, try the website www.opodo.fr.

### GERMANY

There are more flights to Bulgaria from Germany than from any other European country. Bulgaria Air flies five times a week from Sofia to Berlin and daily to Frankfurt. Lufthansa Airlines flies daily from Frankfurt and Munich. Wizz Air flies twice weekly to Sofia from Dortmund.

**STA Travel** (☎ 069-743 032 92; www.statravel.de) has branches in major cities across the country. For online offers, visit www.opodo.de.

## ELSEWHERE IN EUROPE

Numerous flights to Sofia are available from elsewhere in Europe. Prices vary widely, so shop around for the best deal. From Rome, Bulgaria Air flies five times a week. Alitalia also flies regularly from Milan and Rome. Both Austrian Airlines and Bulgaria Air connect Vienna with Sofia at least three times a week. Austrian Airlines also flies daily from Vienna to Varna and three times a week to Burgas.

Bulgaria Air runs daily flights between Sofia and Amsterdam; it also flies six times a week to Brussels, three times a week to Prague, three times a week to Zurich, six times a week to Madrid and three times a week to Barcelona. In summer it also operates weekly services to Malaga, Palma de Mallorca and Alicante.

Czech Airlines flies from Prague to Sofia five days a week. From Poland, LOT Polish Airlines departs daily from Warsaw, while Wizz Air flies from Katowice and Warsaw to Burgas; Wizz also flies from Budapest to both Varna and Burgas. Malev-Hungarian Airlines has regular flights to Sofia and Varna from Budapest. Both Aeroflot and Bulgaria Air travel regularly between Sofia and Moscow all year, and both fly at least once a week between Varna and Moscow. Aerosvit has a regular service to/from Kiev and Sofia.

Further afield, Bulgaria Air also flies to Larnaca and Paphos (in Cyprus), Beirut, Tripoli and Tel Aviv.

## New Zealand

As with Australia, you'll need to fly via another European country to get to Bulgaria from New Zealand. **Flight Centre** (☎ toll-free 0800 243 544; www.flightcentre.co.nz) has branches throughout the country, and **STA Travel** (☎ toll-free 0800 474 400; www.statravel.co.nz) also has offices in the major cities.

## UK

Both British Airways and Bulgaria Air fly daily between London and Sofia. Bulgaria Air is normally the cheaper of the two, with one-way/return flights costing around £120/165. Bulgaria Air also flies to Manchester three times weekly and connects London with Varna three times a week in summer. Budget airline Wizz Air flies three or four times a week between London Luton and Sofia, and in summer also flies to Burgas. Another budget carrier, easyJet, flies regularly between London Gatwick and Sofia.

**STA Travel** (☎ 0871 230 0040; www.statravel.co.uk) has offices across the UK. It sells tickets to all travellers, but caters especially to students and travellers under 26 years. **Student Flights** (☎ 0870 499 4004; www.studentflights.co.uk) and **Global Village Travel** (☎ 0844 844 2541; www.globalvillage-travel.com) are also worth a look. Online ticket agencies such as www.opodo.co.uk and www.expedia.co.uk often have competitive prices.

## USA

There are no direct flights between Bulgaria and anywhere in the USA. You can take a British Airways flight to London, and another on to Sofia, or fly to any major European city, such as Rome, Frankfurt or Paris, and catch a regular flight to Sofia. Prices are subject to change, so check around for the best deals available at the time you wish to travel.

Discount travel agents in the USA and Canada are known as consolidators. San Francisco is the ticket-consolidator capital of America, though some good deals can also be found in most major cities. **Cheap Tickets Inc** (www.cheaptickets.com) is an air consolidator offering discounts of up to 25%. Also worth checking out is the **International Association of Air Travel Couriers** (IAATC; www.courier.org).

**STA Travel** (☎ toll-free 800-781 4040; www.statravel.com) has offices in most major cities. For online quotes, try **Airbrokers** (www.airbrokers.com).

## LAND Border Crossings

There are several crossings into Romania, but if you're driving, use the toll bridge at Ruse or a land border further east. For public transport, the quickest crossing is again at Ruse, but the crossing at Vidin is a more scenic place to enter Romania. You can also cross at Kardam-Negru Voda (accessible from Dobrich) and at Durankulak-Vama Veche (accessible from Varna), but there's no public transport to these points.

The only crossings into Greece are at Kulata-Promahonas and at Svilengrad-Ormenion. The main border crossing into Turkey is Malko Tarnovo-Derekooy. From Kapitan-Andreevo, near Svilengrad, travellers can cross the Turkish border to Edirne.

For Macedonia, the main crossings are between Gyueshevo (near Kyustendil) and Deve Bair (just east of Kriva Palanka); Zlatarevo (west of Kulata) and Delčevo; and Stanke Lisichkovo (near Blagoevgrad) and Novo Selo.

Travelling into Serbia, the main crossings link Kalotina (near Dragoman) and Dimitrovgrad; Vršaska Chuka (near Vidin) and Zajc; and Strézimirovtsi (near Pernik) and Klisura. Be careful when travelling overland by train because crime is not uncommon on services within Serbia.

See p294 for details of stamps and visas.

## Bus

Buses travel to Bulgaria from destinations all over Europe, offering a possibly 'greener' mode of transport than flying, although the sheer distances involved if you're coming from Western Europe can be daunting. From Sofia, buses run as far as Berlin (170 lv), Paris (190 lv), Rome (180 lv) and even London (260 lv). German cities have especially good bus connections with Sofia. International buses also leave from Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas and Haskovo. You will have to get off the bus at the border and walk through customs to present your passport. Long delays can be expected. When travelling out of Bulgaria by bus, the cost of entry visas for the countries concerned are not included in the prices of the bus tickets.

## Car & Motorcycle

Driving is a great way of getting around, but do note that foreign cars are prime targets for thieves. It's probably better to hire a car inside the country (see p302).

## Train

**Bulgarian State Railways** (BDZh; www.bdzh-rila.com) operates all international train services.

## Greece

### BUS

The main departure/arrival points for buses to/from Greece are Sofia and Plovdiv. From Sofia, buses go to Athens (around 100 lv, 12 to 14 hours) and Thessaloniki (around 50 lv, eight to nine hours). Buses from Plovdiv also head to these cities; expect journey times of roughly 22 and 14 hours respectively, and prices of around 95 lv and 55 lv.

### TRAIN

The *Trans-Balkan Express* (trains 460 and 461) runs between Bucharest in Romania and Thessaloniki in Greece, passing through Ruse, Pleven, Sofia, Blagoevgrad and Sandanski.

From Sofia, the journey time to Thessaloniki is roughly 15 hours.

The Sofia–Thessaloniki service (trains 361 and 362) links the two cities every day in summer (15 June to 30 September), taking about nine to 10 hours. Seats start at around 30 lv. Trains also travel between Svilengrad and Thessaloniki (nine to 10 hours).

### Macedonia

Buses to Macedonia leave from Sofia, Blagoevgrad and Kyustendil. Buses from Sofia go to Skopje (24 lv, six hours) and Ohrid (40 lv, nine hours); buses from Kyustendil also go to Skopje (20 lv, five hours), while from Blagoevgrad, a daily service runs to Bitola (30 lv, around eight hours).

No trains travel directly between Bulgaria and Macedonia. The only way to Skopje by train from Sofia is to get a connection in Niš.

Bulgaria Air has three flights a week between Sofia and Skopje (one-way/return around €90/165).

### Romania

#### BUS

There are four daily minibuses running between Ruse and Bucharest (one-way/return 20/30 lv).

#### CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Crossing the bridge from Giurgiu in Romania into Ruse will incur a toll of €6 per car and €2 per motorbike or bicycle. A compulsory €10 ecological tax is also levied by the Bulgarian authorities. You are not permitted to cross at Giurgiu without transport.

#### TRAIN

Most visitors travel to/from Romania by train and either start from or go through Ruse.

The *Bulgaria Express* runs between Sofia and Moscow, via Bucharest and Kiev, daily. The journey from Sofia to Bucharest takes around 12 hours.

Every day in summer, a train from Burgas and another from Varna connects with a train leaving Ruse for Bucharest (15 hours), which carries on towards Prague.

Also, every day in summer the *Sofia–Saratov* service travels to Bucharest. It departs from Sofia at 3.20pm and travels via Plevn, Gorna Oryakhovitsa and Ruse, before arriving at Bucharest about 13 hours later. It departs from Bucharest at 1.40pm.

Fares from Sofia to Bucharest are around 45 lv one way.

The *Trans-Balkan Express* (see Greece, p299) travels daily between Thessaloniki and Bucharest, with onward connections to Budapest, via Sandanski, Sofia, Plevn and Ruse.

The *Bosfor* (trains 498 and 499) links Istanbul with the Romanian capital, passing through Stara Zagora, Veliko Târnovo and Ruse. The train leaves Istanbul at 10pm, Stara Zagora at 7.40am and Ruse at 1.30pm, reaching Bucharest at 4.30pm.

### Serbia

Buses to Serbia leave from Sofia. There are frequent services to/from Belgrade, which cost about 40 lv and take eight hours.

The *Balkan Express* (see Turkey, below) leaves Sofia and travels through Niš to Belgrade. It takes about nine hours from Sofia and a one-way ticket costs about 55 lv. The Sofia–Belgrade service (trains 292 and 293) also links the two capitals.

Bulgaria Air has a regular service between Sofia and Belgrade.

### Turkey

#### BUS

Several companies operate bus services to/from Turkey, departing from Sofia (Istanbul 45 lv, 18 hours), Burgas (Istanbul 35 lv, seven hours) and Varna (Istanbul 40 lv, 10 hours). From Plovdiv and Haskovo, expect to pay around 25 lv for a bus to Istanbul, with journey times of around eight to 10 hours. See the relevant sections in the regional chapters for more details.

#### TRAIN

The daily *Bosfor* (trains 498 and 499) between Istanbul and Bucharest also crosses through Bulgaria year-round. It leaves Ruse for Istanbul passing through Gorna Oryakhovitsa and Stara Zagora (see [www.bd-z-rila.com](http://www.bd-z-rila.com) for current times), and takes around 16 hours.

The *Balkan Express* (trains 490 and 491) travels daily between Istanbul and Belgrade, with onward connections to Zagreb and Venice, via Bulgaria. It passes through Plovdiv and Sofia. The journey from Sofia to Istanbul takes about 15 to 17 hours and costs roughly 50 lv.

### RIVER & SEA

International sea travel to/from Bulgaria is limited to commercial cargo vessels. The

**UKR Shipping Company** ([www.ukrferry.com](http://www.ukrferry.com)) runs cargo ships between Varna and Ilyichevsk in Ukraine, and also accepts individual passengers. Check the website for current arrangements and prices. There are daily ferry services across the Danube to Romania from the ports of Vidin (p261) and Silistra (p277).

### TOURS

Most tourists visit Bulgaria on package tours, the vast majority either based on the Black Sea coast or in the skiing resorts, while others come on tours specialising in bird-watching or hiking. For details about tour operators in Bulgaria, see p304.

One of the few foreign companies that offers organised sightseeing holidays to and around Bulgaria is the London-based **Exodus** (☎ 0845-863 9600; [www.exodus.co.uk](http://www.exodus.co.uk)). Its nine-day 'Rodopi Mountains' tour costs around £600 per person, including flights from London. Check the website for exact prices, which vary through the year, and for other tours.

**Balkan Holidays** ([www.balkanholidays.co.uk](http://www.balkanholidays.co.uk)) is a leading specialist company offering package skiing and beach holidays in Bulgaria. A week in Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasâtsi; p247) in July costs from around £300 per person, including the flight from London.

**Inghams** (☎ 020-8780 4433; [www.ingham.com](http://www.ingham.com)) sells skiing breaks, offering a week in Bansko in January, including flights from the UK, from around £270 per person.

## GETTING AROUND

Bulgaria is relatively easy to get around and a wide range of trains, buses and minibuses are available. To explore the country more fully, you might want to hire a car inside the country.

### AIR

Bulgaria is reasonably compact, and bus and train services are reliable and cheap, but if an eight-hour bus journey from Sofia to the coast doesn't appeal, flying may be the answer.

Bulgaria Air (p296) operates the two domestic routes, flying between Sofia and Varna and Sofia and Burgas.

### BICYCLE

Generally, cycling isn't the most practical (or safest) way of getting about in urban or built-up areas, and accidents involving

cyclists are common on the busy roads of Sofia. Many roads are in poor condition, some major roads are always choked with traffic and bikes aren't allowed on highways. On the other hand, traffic is light along routes between villages and long-distance buses and trains will carry your bike for an extra 2 lv or so. Cycling is a more attractive option in the Black Sea resorts, where there will be plenty of places renting out bikes. Spare parts are available in cities and major towns, but it's better to bring your own. Mountain bikes are a more attractive option in the countryside, and are sporadically available for rent. There are several specific mountain-bike routes (see p80).

### BUS

Buses link all cities and major towns and connect villages with the nearest transport hub. In some places, buses are run by the government. These buses are old, uncomfortable (when compared with city buses) and slow. Newer, quicker and more commodious private buses often operate in larger towns and cities, and normally cost little more than the fare on a ramshackle public bus.

There are also numerous private companies running services all across the country, the biggest of which are **Etap-Grup** (☎ 02-945 3939; [www.etapgroup.com](http://www.etapgroup.com)) and **Biomet** (☎ 02-963 1366; [www.biomet-bg.com](http://www.biomet-bg.com)), which operate from Sofia and link up with most major towns and cities.

All timetables are listed (in Cyrillic) inside the bus stations and all buses have destination signs (in Cyrillic) in the front window.

For a public bus, you normally buy a ticket from the counter marked *kasa* (kaca) inside the station. This way you're guaranteed a seat and you know the correct departure time and platform number. However, in some cases the cashier will tell you to buy a ticket on the bus.

### Costs

Bus travel in Bulgaria is very cheap by Western standards, with a cross-country ticket from Sofia to Varna or Burgas costing around 20 lv to 25 lv, and a ticket from the capital to Sandanski in the far south just 8 lv.

### Reservations

Tickets for public buses can rarely be booked in advance but seats on private buses can be reserved one or more days in advance. However, except for long-distance services

at peak times, eg between Sofia and Varna in August, there's no need to book any bus more than a few hours ahead. In fact, if you arrive at the bus stop or station about 30 minutes before departure, you'll normally get a ticket for the bus you want.

**CAR & MOTORCYCLE**

Probably the best way to travel around Bulgaria – especially when visiting remote villages, monasteries and national parks – is to hire a car (or motorbike). However, there's no point hiring a car and then parking it for three days while you explore Plovdiv or Varna on foot, and it can be difficult driving around any city, particularly Sofia.

**Automobile Associations**

The **Union of Bulgarian Motorists** (Map p88; ☎ 02-935 7935; www.uab.org; pl Positano 3, Sofia) offers a 24-hour 'alarm centre for road assistance service' (☎ 02-980 3308) and has some helpful basic information on its website.

**Bring Your Own Vehicle**

If you do decide to drive your own car into Bulgaria, remember that car theft is very common and foreign cars especially are an immediate target. You will need all the original registration and ownership documents, or your vehicle may be impounded by the police. Before you can drive on motorways, you will need to purchase and display a 'vignette' in your vehicle. For a car, this costs €5/13 for one week/one month. Vignettes can be bought at border crossings when first entering the country, where they are priced in euros, or at post offices once inside Bulgaria, where you will have to pay in leva (one week/one month 10/25 lv). Foreign drivers must state which border crossing they plan to use when leaving.

**Driving Licence**

Drivers of private and rented cars (and motorcycles) must carry registration papers. Your driving licence from home is valid in Bulgaria, so an international driving licence isn't necessary (but it may be useful if you're driving elsewhere in Eastern Europe).

**Fuel**

Petrol is available in unleaded super 95 and unleaded super 98, as well as diesel and LPG. Major brands such as Shell and OMV are often preferred by local drivers because

water has been known to make its way into other brands.

Petrol stations are found roughly every 15km to 20km along the highways, and are mostly open from 5am to 10pm. Some near Sofia and other big cities are open 24 hours.

**Hire**

To rent a car in Bulgaria you must be at least 21 years of age and have had a licence for at least one year. Rental outlets can be found all over Bulgaria, but the biggest choice is in Sofia. Prices start at around €30 per day, though international companies such as Avis and Hertz charge more. All major credit cards are normally accepted.

Some of the more reliable agencies that have offices in the capital and elsewhere:

**Avis** (☎ 02-945 9224; www.avis.bg)

**Budget** (☎ 02-937 3388; www.budget.bg)

**Europcar** (☎ 02-931 6000; www.europcar.bg)

**Hertz** (☎ 02-945 9217; office@hertz.autotechnica.bg)

**Tany 97** (☎ 02-970 8500; www.tany97.bg)

**Tourist Service** (☎ 02-981 7253; www.tourist-service.com)

There are comparatively few places where you can rent a motorbike; one of the better places is **Motoroads** (off Map p84; ☎ 0885370298; www.motoroads.com; office 1, bl 279, Mladost 2, Sofia 1799) in Sofia. It offers a range of motorbikes, costing from €40 per day, plus a deposit of €300.

**Insurance**

Third-party 'liability insurance' is compulsory, and can be purchased at any Bulgarian border. Buying comprehensive insurance in your home country is a better idea (but make sure it's valid in Bulgaria). The Green (or Blue) Card – a routine extension of domestic motor insurance to cover most European countries – is valid in Bulgaria.

**Road Conditions**

Travelling around Bulgaria by private car or motorcycle is not as relaxing as it may be in Western Europe. Other than a few impressive highways, road conditions are generally taxing. Drivers must cope with potholes, roads under reconstruction, slow-moving vehicles, horses and carts and often erratic driving by other motorists.

You should never rely completely on road signs. They're often frustratingly ambiguous, or nonexistent, and most are written in

**ROAD DISTANCES (KM)**

Blagoevgrad	---																				
Burgas	464	---																			
Dobrich	613	185	---																		
Gabrovo	321	234	317	---																	
Haskovo	272	213	388	141	---																
Kulata	82	520	695	403	346	---															
Kyustendil	72	462	602	310	278	154	---														
Lovech	268	299	356	65	206	350	257	---													
Pleven	275	334	347	100	241	357	264	35	---												
Plovdiv	194	270	455	146	78	260	200	159	194	---											
Ruse	421	263	212	152	293	503	410	150	146	298	---										
Shumen	482	148	133	186	302	564	471	225	219	283	115	---									
Silistra	543	262	92	274	374	619	525	272	268	396	122	113	---								
Sliven	353	114	299	130	132	419	359	193	228	159	216	135	248	---							
Smolyan	244	357	541	241	141	207	302	261	296	102	393	356	474	232	---						
Sofia	101	385	512	220	234	183	90	167	174	156	320	381	443	279	258	---					
Stara Zagora	282	182	367	80	61	348	288	145	180	88	232	218	355	71	161	231	---				
Varna	571	134	51	274	371	652	559	313	304	398	203	90	143	248	477	469	316	---			
Veliko Tarnovo	342	224	271	46	187	424	331	85	120	192	106	140	228	110	287	241	126	228	---		
Vidin	300	538	558	308	433	382	289	243	208	355	356	429	478	429	457	199	388	515	328	---	
Vratsa	217	406	451	172	316	299	206	119	108	237	254	329	376	300	329	116	251	421	193	126	---
Blagoevgrad	Burgas	Dobrich	Gabrovo	Haskovo	Kulata	Kyustendil	Lovech	Pleven	Plovdiv	Ruse	Shumen	Silistra	Sliven	Smolyan	Sofia	Stara Zagora	Varna	Veliko Tarnovo	Vidin	Vratsa	

Cyrillic (except around major cities, along the Black Sea coast and at the borders). It is imperative that you buy an accurate map and be able to read Cyrillic.

**Road Hazards**

Vehicle security is a concern so take the usual precautions against car theft. If possible, use a guarded car park or hotel car park, or park under a street light. Never leave any valuables in the car.

And please take care as Bulgaria's roads are among the most dangerous in Europe; over 200 people lost their lives on the country's roads in the first few months of 2007 alone, and almost 2000 were injured. The worst time is the holiday season (July to September), with drink-driving, speeding and poor road conditions contributing to accidents. Sofia and roads along the Black Sea coast can be particularly nerve-wracking.

**Road Rules**

Although road signs are rare, the official speed limits for cars are 50km/h in built-up areas, 90km/h on main roads and 130km/h

on motorways. Speed limits for motorcycles, trucks and buses are 50km/h in built-up areas and 80/100km/h on main roads/motorways. Traffic police have recently been given extra powers to flag down drivers for spot inspections, and fines have been increased. You can be fined up to 250 lv for speeding. Drivers and passengers in the front must wear seat belts, and motorcyclists must wear helmets. The blood-alcohol limit is 0.05% and traffic police are very unforgiving about drink-driving. Although the situation has improved over recent years, the Bulgarian traffic police have a reputation for corruption, and for being keen on stopping nice, expensive foreign cars. If you are fined, insist on receiving a proper receipt.

If you have an accident, you must wait with your vehicle and have someone call the local traffic police (see inside front cover).

**HITCHING**

Hitching is never entirely safe in any country in the world and we don't recommend it. Travellers who decide to hitch should understand that they are taking a small but potentially

serious risk. People who do choose to hitch will be safer if they travel in pairs and let someone know where they're planning to go.

Hitchhiking is officially illegal in Bulgaria, but people still do it, and hitching in rural Bulgaria may be preferable to being restricted by infrequent public transport (but travel will tend to be in fits and starts because many cars often only travel to the next village). The upsurge in crime over the last few years has dissuaded some Bulgarians from offering lifts to hitchhikers. Bulgaria's borders are not particularly 'user friendly', so hitching across them is not recommended.

## LOCAL TRANSPORT

### Minibus

Private and public minibuses ply routes between smaller villages, eg along the Black Sea coast and between urban centres and ski resorts in winter. Tickets for minibuses cost roughly the same as public buses but are usually bought from the driver (though always check this first at the counter inside the bus station). If you can choose between a public bus and minibus, take the latter because it's quicker, normally more comfortable and standing is rarely allowed. Destinations (in Cyrillic) and, often, departure times are indicated on the front window. Most minibuses leave from inside, or very close to, the major public bus station. In Sofia, minibuses called *marshrutki* run between the city centre and the suburbs, acting like shared taxis (see p107).

## Public Transport

All cities and major towns have buses, but they tend to be overcrowded and uncomfortably hot in summer. New privately run minibuses operate in some cities, such as Sofia. The few places with useful bus and minibus routes are detailed in the relevant Getting Around sections throughout this book, but you're almost always better off using a taxi (see the next section). Bus tickets are regularly checked by conductors, especially in Sofia. Don't forget to buy an extra ticket for each piece of large luggage (ie suitcase or backpack). Major cities also have trams and trolleybuses (a cross between a tram and bus) and Sofia has a modern metro system.

## Taxi

Taxis, which must be painted yellow and equipped with working meters, can be flagged down on most streets in every city and town

throughout Bulgaria. They can be very cheap, but rates do vary enormously, so it pays to shop around before jumping in. Taxis can be chartered for longer trips at negotiable rates, which you can approximate by working out the distance and taxi rate per kilometre, plus waiting time.

All drivers must clearly display their rates on the taxi's windows. These rates are divided into three or four lines:

- The first line lists the rate per kilometre from 6am to 10pm (about 0.50 lv per kilometre is average), and the night-time rate (sometimes the same, but often about 10% more).
- The second lists, if applicable, the call-out fee of about 0.50 lv if you preorder a taxi (almost never necessary).
- The third (or second-last) lists the starting fee (0.30 lv to 0.50 lv).
- The fourth (last) lists the cost for waiting per minute (0.20 lv to 0.30 lv).

Some drivers try to overcharge unwary foreigners by claiming the meter 'doesn't work' (it must work by law) or offering a flat fare (which will always be at least double the proper metered fare). Dishonest drivers congregate outside airports, train and bus stations and city centres in Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas and in the resorts along the Black Sea coast.

## TOURS

As more and more independent foreign tourists 'discover' Bulgaria, new travel agencies have emerged to offer activity and special-interest tours. Some will just bus you off on the well-trodden paths to Rila Monastery and the like, and large groups are normally required, while others offer a more personal service. For some overseas-based companies that offer tours, see p301.

If you're pressed for time or find getting around a little difficult, an organised tour is worth considering. Even a one-day tour can be worthwhile, especially to remote monasteries and villages. Travel agencies and tourist offices that offer local tours are listed in the regional chapters of this book. Plenty of agencies at the Black Sea resorts of Albena, Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) and Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) offer tours, but to avoid unnecessary expense, check out the local transport before booking a pricey 'excursion' to the nearest town.

Enterprising Bulgarian travel agencies that offer interesting tours around Bulgaria are surprisingly few and far between but you could try the following companies:

**Motoroads** (off Map p84; ☎ 0885370298; www.motoroads.com; office 1, bl 279, Mladost 2, Sofia 1799) Offers a wide choice of organised motorbike tours round the country.

**Neophron** (☎ 052-650 230, www.neophron.com; PO Box 492, Varna) Runs guided bird-watching trips on the coast and in the mountains, as well as other trips for those interested in botany or wild animals. It's run by professional ornithologists.

**Odyssea-In Travel Agency** (Map p88; ☎ 02-989 0538; www.odyssea-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia) Odyssea-In can book you on hiking, snowshoeing, caving, bird-watching, botany or numerous other trips across the country. It can also book rooms in over 100 mountain huts, monasteries and village homes.

**Zig Zag Holidays** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia) Offers environmentally sensitive tours and tailor-made outdoor activities, including hiking, climbing, caving and nature trips. Contact them for prices.

## TRAIN

Balgarski Dърzhavni Zheleznitsi (БДЖ) – the **Bulgarian State Railways** (BDZh; ☎ 02-931 1111; www.bdzh.bg) – boasts an impressive 4278km of tracks across the country, linking most sizable towns and cities, although some are on a spur track and only connected to a major railway line by infrequent services. Apart from on a couple of lines, including Sofia–Kyustendil and Sofia–Plovdiv, trains tend to be antiquated and shabby, and journey times are slow. Buses are normally quicker, more comfortable and more frequent, especially between cities and major towns, although on the plus side, you'll have more room in a train compartment, and the scenery is likely to be more rewarding.

Trains are classified as *ekspresen* (express), *bърз* (fast) or *pátnicheski* (slow passenger). Unless you absolutely thrive on train travel, you want to visit a smaller village or you're travelling on a tight budget, use a fast or express train.

Two of the most spectacular train trips are along Iskár Gorge, from Sofia to Mezdra, and on the narrow-gauge track between Septemvri and Bansko. Railway buffs often go on these trips for no other reason than the journey itself.

## BULGARIAN RAILWAYS



Train travel in Bulgaria is a normally safe and enjoyable experience, but there have been reports of robberies, pickpocketing and minor annoyances (such as drunkenness) on some cross-border routes, such as to/from Turkey or Serbia. If you are travelling late at night, sit with other passengers rather than in an empty compartment, and if you are making a long overnight trip across the border, try booking a bed in a couchette.

### Classes

First-class compartments seat six people, eight are crammed into 2nd class, and the intercity express has individual seats in an open carriage. Sleepers and couchettes are available between Sofia and Burgas and Varna but must be booked in advance. Fares for 1st class are around 25% higher than for 2nd class. The carriages won't be any cleaner, but it's always worth paying the extra just to have a bit more space.

### Costs

Although prices have risen in recent years, train travel within Bulgaria is still cheap by Western standards, with a cross-country trip between Sofia and Varna costing approximately 22 lv (2nd class). A 1st-class ticket on this route costs 27 lv, probably the most you'd ever pay for a seat on a domestic train service in Bulgaria. If you're travelling in a group (three or more people) you may get a slight discount.

### Reservations

For frequent train services between the main cities there is rarely a problem if you simply turn up at the station and purchase a ticket for the next train (but be careful to allow at least 30 minutes to queue up). Advance tickets are

### TICKETS

All tickets are printed in Cyrillic. Other than the place of departure and destination, tickets also contain other important details:

Клас – *klas* – '1' (1st class) or '2' (2nd class)

Категория – *kategoriya* – type of train, ie T (express), 255 (fast) or G (slow passenger)

Влак – *vlak* – train number

Час – *chas* – departure time

Дата – *data* – date of departure

Вагон – *vagon* – carriage number

Място – *myasto* – seat number

sometimes advisable on train services such as the intercity express to the Black Sea during a summer weekend. Advance tickets can be bought at specific counters within larger train stations and at Rila Bureaux in cities and major towns. Staff at Rila are normally far more helpful, knowledgeable and likely to speak English than anyone at a train station, so it's best to deal with Rila for advice, schedules and advance tickets.

### Train Passes

BDZh is part of the InterRail system, and a one-country pass is available, but given the low cost of train travel in Bulgaria, this is unlikely to be cost-effective. These passes have to be bought outside the country. City Star rail passes are also valid in Bulgaria, for travel to various other European countries. Finally, Rail Plus cards offer 25% discounts on international routes for those under 26 (Rail Plus 26M) or over 60 (Rail Plus S). Cards cost 30 lv. For more details, visit [www.bdz-rila.com](http://www.bdz-rila.com).

# Health

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Travel health depends on your predeparture preparations, your daily care while travelling and how you handle any medical problem that does develop. Bulgaria will not provide any major challenges to visitors' health.

## BEFORE YOU GO

Prevention is the key to staying healthy while abroad. A little planning before departure, particularly for pre-existing illnesses or conditions, will save trouble later. Carry a spare pair of contact lenses and glasses, and take your optical prescription with you. Bring extra medications in their original, clearly labelled, containers. A signed and dated letter from your physician describing your medical conditions and medications, including generic names, is also a good idea. If carrying syringes or needles, be sure to have a physician's letter documenting their medical necessity.

### INSURANCE

Citizens of other European Economic Area countries (EU countries plus Norway, Iceland and Liechtenstein) should pick up a European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) before they travel, which entitles you to the same immediate medical treatment available to Bulgarian nationals. However, you should also consider buying a policy that covers you for the worst possible scenario, such as an accident requiring an emergency flight home.

### INTERNET RESOURCES

The World Health Organisation's publication *International Travel and Health* is revised

annually and is available online at [www.who.int/ith/](http://www.who.int/ith/). Other useful websites include: [www.ageconcern.org.uk](http://www.ageconcern.org.uk) Advice on travel for the elderly. [www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk](http://www.fitfortravel.scot.nhs.uk) General travel advice for the layperson. [www.maristopes.org.uk](http://www.maristopes.org.uk) Providing information on women's health and contraception. [www.mdtravelhealth.com](http://www.mdtravelhealth.com) Travel health recommendations for every country; updated daily.

## IN BULGARIA

### AVAILABILITY OF HEALTH CARE

Every city and major town has a government hospital of an acceptable – albeit not excellent – standard, as well as more up-to-date private clinics. Smaller towns and villages may have a clinic, but for serious complaints you should travel to a larger town or ask your embassy /consulate to recommend a hospital, clinic, doctor or dentist. Dental clinics are easy to find in big cities and *apteka* (pharmacies) are common. Doctors at *bolnitsa* (government hospitals) are well trained and most speak English and/or German. However, equipment can be lacking and outdated. Staff at the more expensive *poliklinika* (private clinics), such as in Sofia (p85), are more likely to be fluent in English and German, and equipment is normally of a higher standard.

### INFECTIOUS DISEASES

#### Tickborne Encephalitis

This is spread by tick bites. It is a serious infection of the brain and vaccination is advised for those in risk areas who are unable to avoid tick bites (such as campers, forestry workers and walkers). Two doses of vaccine will give a year's protection, three doses up to three years'.

#### Typhoid & Hepatitis A

These are spread through contaminated food (particularly shellfish) and water. Typhoid can cause septicaemia; Hepatitis A causes liver inflammation and jaundice. Neither is usually fatal but recovery can be prolonged. Hepatitis A and typhoid vaccines can be given as a single-dose vaccine, Hepatix or Viatim.

## Rabies

This is a potential concern considering the number of stray dogs running around Bulgaria. If bitten, seek medical attention immediately (most main hospitals will have a rabies clinic), but don't panic; while rabies is transmitted via the animal's saliva, the rabies virus is present in saliva only during the final stages of the disease in the animal, often only in the last week of the dog's life. It is therefore a relatively rarely transmitted disease. Still, do not take any chances and seek medical attention. Any bite, scratch or even lick from an unknown animal should be cleaned immediately and thoroughly. Scrub with soap and running water, and then apply alcohol or iodine solution.

## TRAVELLER'S DIARRHOEA

If you develop diarrhoea, be sure to drink plenty of fluids, preferably an oral rehydration solution (eg Dioralyte). A few loose stools don't require treatment, but if you start having more than four or five stools a day, you should start taking an antibiotic (usually a quinolone drug) and an antidiarrhoeal agent (such as loperamide). If diarrhoea is bloody, persists for more than 72 hours or is accompanied by fever, shaking, chills or severe abdominal pain, you should seek medical attention.

## ENVIRONMENTAL HAZARDS

### Air Pollution

Due to the large number of old, poorly maintained vehicles rattling around the roads in Bulgaria, the build up of traffic fumes can be unpleasant in Sofia and other big cities, and may affect those with respiratory problems. Thankfully, it's easy enough to escape the urban sprawl and get some fresh air in the country. Cigarette smoke, however, is harder to avoid. Bulgarians are notorious chain-smokers, and restaurants and bars can get particularly fuggy.

### Hypothermia & Frostbite

Proper preparation will reduce the risk of getting hypothermia. Even on a hot day in the mountains, the weather can change rapidly, so carry waterproof garments and warm layers, and inform others of your route.

Acute hypothermia follows a sudden drop of temperature over a short time. Chronic hypothermia is caused by a gradual loss of temperature over hours.

Hypothermia starts with shivering, loss of judgment and clumsiness. Unless rewarming occurs, the sufferer deteriorates into apathy, confusion and coma. Prevent further heat loss by seeking shelter, warm dry clothing, hot sweet drinks and shared body warmth.

Frostbite is caused by freezing and subsequent damage to bodily extremities. It is dependent on wind-chill, temperature and length of exposure. Frostbite starts as frostnip (white, numb areas of skin) from which complete recovery is expected with rewarming. As frostbite develops, the skin blisters and then becomes black. Adequate clothing, staying dry, keeping well hydrated and ensuring adequate calorie intake best prevent frostbite. Treatment involves rapid rewarming.

## Water

Tap water is generally considered safe to drink in all major towns and cities, although it might not taste particularly nice. Caution should be taken in smaller villages, and if staying at older or more remote hotels where the water pipes may be as old as the buildings themselves. The fountains in town parks and outside monasteries and churches provide an ideal source of drinkable water. *Cheshma* (water spouts), often found along main roads, also offer constant supplies of fresh, delicious and safe water.

If in doubt, purify water (with filters, iodine or chlorine) or boil it. At high altitude water boils at a lower temperature, so germs are less likely to be killed. Boil it for longer in these environments.

Easiest, and safest, of all, is to simply buy bottled water, which is inexpensive and sold everywhere. Fill the empty bottles up at public fountains to avoid unnecessary waste.

## WOMEN'S HEALTH

Emotional stress, exhaustion and travelling through different time zones can all contribute to an upset in the menstrual pattern. If using oral contraceptives, remember some antibiotics, diarrhoea and vomiting can stop the pill from working and lead to the risk of pregnancy – remember to take condoms with you just in case. Time zones, gastrointestinal upsets and antibiotics do not affect injectable contraceptives. Travelling during pregnancy is usually possible, but always consult your doctor before planning your trip. The most risky times for travel are during the first 12 weeks of pregnancy and after 30 weeks.

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