

Destination Bulgaria

Five centuries subjugated to Ottoman rule and, more recently, four decades locked very firmly behind the Iron Curtain turned Bulgaria into a distant, enigmatic country in the eyes of much of the rest of the world. Images of cheap wine downed at student house parties, budget ski holidays and umbrella-wielding Cold War assassins were once among the popular stereotypes, but Bulgaria today is a vastly different country from what it was even 10 years ago.

A fully paid-up member of NATO and (since 2007) the EU, Bulgaria has the feel of a nation at a very important crossroads. Massive foreign investment has created a construction boom, not just around the larger beach and mountain tourist resorts, but in the cities, too. More tourists than ever are discovering this country and an ever-rising number of foreigners are investing in property here. At the same time, the Bulgarian population is declining faster than almost anywhere else in Europe, wages are amongst the lowest on the continent – prompting increasingly long and bitter strikes – and the old problems of bureaucratic incompetence and organised crime bubble away in the background. The environmental damage caused by overdevelopment has been a particular cause for public alarm over recent years, and there are several national and international organisations campaigning to bring some of these issues to wider world attention (see p72). However much they complain, though, Bulgarians are a patriotic, if modest, bunch – when they ask you, as they often will, if you like their country, they genuinely care that you leave with good impressions.

For most foreign holidaymakers, Bulgaria's main lure is its long, sandy coastline – which still boasts swaths of stunning beaches and picturesque bays despite the expansive construction work – but there is so much more to this country, and so much of it remains largely untouched and unvisited by overseas tourists. Networks of well-maintained hiking trails and horse-riding routes allow you to discover Bulgaria's lush mountainous and forested landscapes, inhabited by bears, lynx, rare birds and other kinds of wildlife now becoming scarce elsewhere in Europe.

Getting around the country is easy, with cheap and efficient public transport to ferry you between the cities and into the remoter, rural corners, where the traditional, slow pace of life continues much as it has done for centuries. Here you'll come across multicoloured monasteries, filled with fabulous icons and watched over by bushy-bearded priests, and impossibly pretty timber-framed villages with smoke curling lazily over the stone-tiled roofs and donkeys complaining in the distance, where headscarfed old ladies and their curious grandchildren still stare in wonderment at the arrival of outsiders. The cities, too, are often overlooked highlights, from dynamic, cosmopolitan Sofia with its lovely parks, sociable alfresco bars and fascinating museums, to the National Revival architectural treasures and Roman remains of Plovdiv, and the youthful maritime cockiness of Varna.

Prices have certainly risen since Bulgaria became a member of the EU, but compared with countries in Western Europe, travellers will find it by and large a pleasingly cheap destination, and an easy and enjoyable one to travel round once you've mastered the Cyrillic alphabet and enough Bulgarian to buy a bus ticket. Bring your own transport and the whole country is yours to explore.

FAST FACTS

Population: 7.33 million
 Area: 110,910 sq km
 GDP per capita: US\$10,700
 Inflation: 7.3%
 Unemployment rate: 9.6%
 Average life expectancy: 69 (m), 76 (f)
 Literacy rate: 98.2%
 Highest point: Mt Musala (2925m)
 Export: Bulgaria produces 10% of the world's rose oil
 Body language: Bulgarians shake their heads for 'yes' and nod for 'no'

Getting Started

Travelling independently in Bulgaria is cheap, relatively hassle-free and immensely rewarding. Public transport is generally reliable and inexpensive, and will get you around most of the country, although if you're looking to explore the place in any great depth, you'll certainly require your own wheels, especially for the more remote, rural areas. The accommodation options are vast, ranging from private rooms and budget guesthouses, where nobody is likely to speak foreign languages, up to international five-star hotels that can be booked online.

Remember that Bulgarians use the Cyrillic alphabet, and it's essential that you get acquainted with this before you travel. English is widely understood in the big cities and tourist centres, and German is the more common second language in the coastal resorts, but in the countryside, knowledge of foreign languages is rare. Older, better-educated Bulgarians often have a smattering of French. Don't rely on staff at bus and train stations anywhere, even in Sofia, speaking anything but Bulgarian, but learning a few basic phrases will certainly ease your passage and make your trip much more enjoyable. The new tourist offices in the main cities will be very happy to help with any queries and staff at backpacker hostels and upscale hotels, which are more used to dealing with international guests, almost always speak English and will have plenty of information to hand.

Most foreign tourists still come to Bulgaria on all-inclusive package deals, either for sunbathing on the coast or skiing in the mountains, which can work out to be quite cost-effective as they also include airfares. If you're based at a beach or ski resort, it's easy to visit nearby attractions by public bus, hire car or on day trips organised by local tour companies. Some agencies based in Sofia (see p86) run a huge range of day trips and multiday activity and special-interest tours, so if you're keen on archaeology, bird-watching, botany, caving or climbing (to name just a few), these are a good way to see the best that the country has to offer.

WHEN TO GO

Bulgaria has a temperate climate with cold, damp winters and hot, dry summers. The Rodopi Mountains form a barrier to the moderating Mediterranean influence of the Aegean, while the Danube Plain is open to the extremes of central Europe. Sofia's generally favourable climate is one of its main attributes, with average daytime highs of 28°C in July and August and 3°C from December to February. The Black Sea moderates temperatures in the east of the country. Rainfall is highest in the mountains, and in winter life throughout Bulgaria is sometimes disrupted by heavy snowfalls.

Spring (particularly April to mid-June) is an excellent time to visit. The weather is good, the theatres and other cultural venues are in full swing and low-season rates still generally apply. Summer (mid-June to early September) is ideal for hiking and festivals, but it's also the peak holiday season, especially on the Black Sea coast. Temperatures can be very high during this period too. September is perhaps one of the best months to see Bulgaria. The autumn trees are glorious, fruit and vegetables are plentiful, the tourist hordes have returned home, and you can still sunbathe and swim in the Black Sea.

By mid-October, almost all Black Sea resorts have closed down. As the weather gets colder over the next two months, a gloom about the

DON'T LEAVE HOME WITHOUT...

- Valid travel insurance (see p288)
- Sturdy boots and a day-pack if you intend to do any hiking
- Toilet paper
- A towel if staying at budget accommodation
- Sunscreen and a sun-hat if travelling in summer
- An adaptor plug
- A water bottle for filling at public fountains
- Mosquito repellent
- A travel insurance policy (www.lonelyplanet.com/bookings) covering mountaineering, rock climbing, diving and skiing
- Checking out the Thorn Tree forum (www.lonelyplanet.com/thortree) for more great tips, travel news and views

impending winter (December to March) permeates Bulgaria. Then, as soon as the first snows fall in around mid-December, Bulgarians start to perk up and flock to the ski resorts, which sometimes stay operating until mid-April.

The high season along the Black Sea coast is mid-July to late August; at the ski resorts, it's Christmas/New Year and February to mid-March. If you avoid these places at these times, you may be astounded at how few tourists there are in Bulgaria.

COSTS & MONEY

Since Bulgaria joined the EU in 2007, the dual-pricing system that used to be in force – whereby foreigners were often charged considerably more for hotel rooms and museum admission fees than locals – has been abolished. Inevitably, prices have risen, but travelling around the country remains relatively cheap. All food, drink and forms of transport are surprisingly inexpensive compared with Western European countries, but imported luxury goods, such as international-brand fashion and cosmetics, cost much the same as anywhere else.

A camping site costs about 10 lv per person and a room in a private home can cost anywhere between 12 lv and 30 lv, depending on the location. In a budget hotel (outside Sofia) a single room costs from 20 lv, 40 lv for a double. In a mid-range hotel a single room is roughly 40 lv, a double 60 lv. You can get a simple meal at a cheap café from as little as 3 lv, and you're unlikely to spend more than about 15 lv for a main course, even in more upmarket restaurants.

Many museums and galleries offer free entry on one day of the week, a bonus if you're travelling with a family. These details are noted where relevant in reviews throughout the book. Also, if you fancy staying at a top-class hotel but don't fancy paying the top-class tariff, remember that most offer discounted weekend rates (which usually means Friday to Sunday night). Some top-end hotels in Sofia offer discounts during August, when most tourists have gone to the coast.

If you stay at budget hotels or in private rooms, eat cheap Bulgarian food and catch public buses and 2nd-class trains, allow at least 50 lv per person per day. If you want to stay in midrange hotels, eat at higher-quality restaurants, charter occasional taxis, take 1st-class trains and buy souvenirs, allow about 80 lv per person per day. If you're staying in Sofia, you can basically double this cost.

HOW MUCH?

- Coffee at street kiosk: 0.60 lv
- Bus/tram ticket: 0.70 lv
- Kebabche* (grilled spicy meat sausages) and chips: 4 lv
- Bottle of decent Bulgarian wine: 5 lv
- CD of Bulgarian music: 15 lv

TOP PICKS

BULGARIA'S MOST PICTURESQUE VILLAGES

The heart of Bulgaria can be found in its small, rural communities, and the country has numerous little timber-framed villages where the style and pace of life seem to belong to another time. The following villages are worth visiting for their architecture, ambience and surrounding landscapes.

- Koprivshitsa – National Revival architecture at its best (p191)
- Melnik – famous for its excellent wine (p134)
- Arbanasi – known for its wonderful religious murals (p179)
- Shiroka Lúka – famous for its humpbacked bridges and pretty cobbled lanes (p160)
- Bulgari – best known for its annual fire-dancing festival (p227)
- Kotel – renowned for its handmade carpets (p209)
- Shipka – the heartland of the Thracians (p202)

BULGARIA'S BEST RELIGIOUS ART

Bulgaria is well known for its beautiful religious icons, a rich tradition going back many centuries into the Byzantine and Slavic past. Churches and monasteries across the country are a blaze of colour, with wonderful frescoes, murals and icons on show, while many ancient and precious examples of this art can now be seen in museums. Listed below are the best places to see Bulgaria's most important and most exquisite religious art.

- Museum of Icons (Aleksander Nevski Crypt), Sofia (p91)
- Boyana Church, Sofia (p108)
- Rila Monastery (p117)
- Bachkovo Monastery (p153)
- Sveti Stefan Church, Nesebár (p232)
- Nativity Church, Arbanasi (p180)
- Troyan Monastery (p190)

To read more lists of recommended travel experiences, and for the chance to create your own, visit www.lonelyplanet.com/bluelist.

Midrange and top-end hotels, as well as car hire firms and tour agencies often quote prices in euros, and it's possible to pay in this currency, or in leva. Bulgaria is unlikely to formally join the single European currency for some years yet.

TRAVELLING RESPONSIBLY

Since our inception in 1973, Lonely Planet has encouraged our readers to tread lightly, travel responsibly and enjoy the magic independent travel affords. International travel is growing at a jaw-dropping rate, and we still firmly believe in the benefits it can bring – but, as always, we encourage you to consider the impact your visit will have on the global environment and the local economies, cultures and ecosystems.

The rapid development of tourism in Bulgaria in recent years may have given a boost to the economy, but many Bulgarians are beginning to wonder at what cost. Hotel and holiday-home developments all along the Black Sea have been particularly controversial, with some stretches of coastline resembling colossal building sites as developers try to cash in on

the property boom. There has even been illegal construction in supposedly protected nature reserves. The other main areas of development have been the mountain ski resorts, especially Bansko, and a massive new project based around Borovets has just been given the green light.

However, 'green' tourism is also on the up in Bulgaria, and several operators offer nature tours, activity trips and so on, with the emphasis on sustainable tourism. With a healthy sense of adventure you can experience the very best the country has to offer by going off the beaten track and staying in small, family-run hotels in rural villages. The best company to contact for a wide range of tours is *Odyssea-In* in Sofia (p86). Before you travel, it's also worth checking out the Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (baatbg.org).

For more information on the environmental challenges being faced in Bulgaria, see the Environment chapter on p69.

Getting There & Away

If you are worried about the environmental impact of air travel, and don't want to fly to Bulgaria, you can also reach the country by bus from many other European countries, although the sheer distances involved from Western Europe may put off all but the hardy few. You can also buy an InterRail ticket, hop on a train and make Bulgaria your final port of call on a European odyssey. For information on train travel in Bulgaria and elsewhere in Europe, visit www.seat61.com.

Most towns in Bulgaria are well served by cheap public transport, and you'll probably find buses the quickest and most convenient way of getting around the country; trains tend to be slower, although the major cross-country lines do offer the faster 'express' trains. Unfortunately, city buses are often old and cause a good deal of pollution, though inter-city buses tend to be newer and more energy-efficient. Sofia also has trams and a metro system. Bicycles are not recommended for urban areas, but are a great mode of transport for exploring the open countryside in rural regions.

Accommodation & Food

As a foreign tourist your leva can make a real difference to the local economy. Instead of staying at international chain hotels, which all take money out of the country, consider staying in private rooms; pensioners, who often have to survive on tiny incomes, advertise spare rooms in their homes outside bus and train stations, and if you take them up on the offer you'll know the money is going straight into their pockets. You can also book these rooms through agencies, who will take a small commission from the homeowners. There are plenty of small, family-run hotels and guesthouses all over the country, and staying at these often ecologically-aware places, especially in the poorer, more remote locations will inject much-needed cash into the locality. We've made sure to include some of these in this book, while the excellent *Bed & Breakfasts Guidebook* (see p280) is a good source of information, with contact details and reviews of numerous small, rural, family-run hotels all over the country.

You won't find many restaurants advertising organic ingredients but much Bulgarian food, especially that grown on small family farms or in people's gardens, is organic, and a lot of this ends up being sold in street markets. These are often the best places to find good, fresh food, and, again, purchasing goods directly from small producers rather than supermarkets means you'll be helping the local economy.

Bulgaria is the fourth largest exporter of medicinal herbs in the world; some 170 species thrive in the countryside.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bulgaria boasts over 500 mineral springs dotted around the country. Sapareva Banya (102°C), in the Rila Mountains, is said to be the hottest spring in Europe.

Responsible Travel Schemes

There are a number of organisations and programmes promoting sustainable tourism and supporting small-scale, ecologically friendly businesses in Bulgaria. These include:

Authentic Bulgaria (www.authenticbulgaria.org)

Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (www.baatbg.org)

Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (www.bbf.biodiversity.bg)

Ecotourism Bulgaria (www.ecotourism.bulgariatravel.org)

Neophron (www.neophron.com)

Odyssea-In (www.odyssea-in.com)

World Wide Workers on Organic Farms (www.woofbulgaria.org)

TRAVEL LITERATURE

There are relatively few books by foreign writers devoted solely to Bulgaria; most include the country as part of a journey around Eastern Europe and/or the Balkans.

Under The Yoke by Ivan Vazov is Bulgaria's best loved novel, and a new English translation has been published recently after being out of print for decades. The book tells the patriotic story of the iconic April Uprising of 1876 and Bulgaria's struggle for independence from the Ottoman Empire.

The Black Sea: The Birthplace of Civilization and Barbarism by Neal Acherson is a fascinating overview of the turbulent history of the peoples living around the Black Sea, from earliest times onwards.

Liberation of Bulgaria: War Notes of 1877 by Wentworth Huyshe offers a first-hand account of the hard-fought Russo-Turkish War by a British journalist.

Turkish Gambit by Boris Akunin offers a lighter, fictional view of the Russo-Turkish War, as seen through the eyes of the popular novelist's Russian detective.

Bury Me Standing by Isabel Fonseca is a thoughtful insight into the customs, myths and troubled history of the Romany people across Eastern Europe.

INTERNET RESOURCES

There's no better place to start your web explorations than the Lonely Planet website (www.lonelyplanet.com). Here you will find succinct summaries on travelling to most places on earth, postcards from other travellers and the Thorn Tree bulletin board, where you can ask questions before you go or dispense advice when you get back.

Other useful websites (all in English) to access before you travel:

Beach Bulgaria (www.beachbulgaria.com) Information on the Black Sea resorts, plus details of many hotels on the coast.

Bulgarian Insider (www.the-bulgarian-insider.com) Interesting range of information on the country, including history, culture and practical details.

Bulgarian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (www.mfa.government.bg) Good for current affairs and links to all government departments.

HotelsCentral.com (www.hotelsbulgaria.com) Offers attractive discounts for hotel rooms (if booked for three or more nights).

Lonely Planet (www.lonelyplanet.com) Get quick Bulgaria info and inspiration with our travel stories, podcasts and hotel and hostel reviews. Ask other travellers on the Thorn Tree forum.

Novinite (www.novinite.com) The latest Bulgarian news and views from the Sofia-based news agency.

Pictures of Bulgaria (www.picturesofbulgaria.com) Comprehensive site with information on tourist sights and hotels and links to other sights.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Gerak Family (1911) by Elin Pelin tells the nostalgic story of a traditional rural community in transition, and has twice been made into a film.

Sofia Echo (www.sofiaecho.com) Up-to-the-minute news about Bulgaria as well as restaurant and entertainment reviews for the capital.

Travel Bulgaria (www.travel-bulgaria.com) Excellent site for travel information, including links.

Vagabond (www.vagabond-bg.com) Bulgaria's only English-language lifestyle magazine, with features on current talking-points.

Visit to Bulgaria (www.visittobulgaria.com) Excellent portal with information on a wide range of topics.

Events Calendar

Bulgaria hosts a bewildering number of religious, folkloric, music and wine festivals. Most have traditions dating back hundreds of years, while others are established mainly to attract tourists. There's at least one major festival every summer weekend somewhere in the country.

JANUARY

ST VASIL'S DAYFOLK CONCERT 1 Jan (Sandanski) Traditionally, New Year's Day is marked by young boys, known as *sourvakari*, tapping people with decorated twigs to wish them luck. The day ends with traditional festive music and partying.

KUKERI 1 Jan (Bansko) Traditional pagan mummer performance with men dressed in hideous masks and shaggy costumes, ringing bells to scare away bad spirits. Also occurs in the countryside around Pernik in mid-January.

IORDANOVDEN 6 Jan (Koprivshitsa) Religious event dedicated to the healing powers of water. A priest throws a crucifix into the river and local youths dive in to retrieve it.

FEBRUARY

TRIFON ZAREZAN FESTIVAL 1 Feb (Melnik) To celebrate the patron saint of wine-making, the vines are pruned, sprinkled with wine and blessed by a priest. Then the music and drinking begins.

MARCH

BABA MARTA 1 Mar (Nationwide) 'Granny March' signifies the beginning of spring, and Bulgarians present each other with red and white woollen tassels, known as *martinitsi*, as good luck tokens.

KUKERI 1st Sun in Mar (Shiroka Lúka) Locals parade in elaborate goat-skin costumes and startling masks in this ancient fertility rite.

SOFIA INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL early Mar (Sofia) Bulgaria's main movie event, showcasing the latest Bulgarian feature films and documentaries, plus independent films from overseas.

PANCHO VLADIGEROV MUSICAL DAYS mid-Mar (Shumen) The life and works of the local classical composer are musically celebrated at the city's Museum Complex of Pancho Vladigerov.

MARCH DAYS OF MUSIC FESTIVAL last two weeks of Mar (Ruse) One of the oldest classical music festivals in Bulgaria, held since 1961, with concerts around town.

TODOROV DEN 1st Sat of Lent (Koprivshitsa) St Theodore's Day is marked with horse racing and music in a meadow at the edge of town.

APRIL

FOLKLORIC FESTIVAL 1 Apr (Melnik) Fun day out with traditional music concerts and wine on tap.

MUSIC FESTIVAL one week in mid-Apr (Shiroka Lúka) Traditional Bulgarian music and dancing at its best, with participants from the town's music academy and the region.

MAY

FLORA FLOWER EXHIBITION all month (Burgas) The city comes alive with colourful blooms for the annual celebration of all things floral and botanical.

RE-ENACTMENT OF THE APRIL UPRISING 1 & 2 May (Koprivshitsa) The momentous events of 1876 are remembered by patriotic locals in period costumes.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF HUMOUR & SATIRE biannual (Gabrovo) The city revels in its reputation for mockery with a street carnival and international competitions for humorous artwork. Entries remain on show till September.

VARNA SUMMER INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL May-Oct (Varna) One of the oldest and biggest festivals in Bulgaria, comprising music, theatre and numerous other cultural events.

INTERNATIONAL PLOVDIV FAIR one week in mid-May (Plovdiv) Going since 1892, this is the pre-eminent commercial trade fair in the Balkans, with varying business and industry exhibitions.

DAYS OF SHUMEN CULTURAL FESTIVAL mid-May (Shumen) Hearty celebration of civic culture, with concerts, theatre performances and art exhibitions.

CELEBRATION OF BANSKO TRADITIONS 17-24 May (Bansko) Locals take to the streets to celebrate regional folklore with dancing, live music and a craft fair.

CULTURAL MONTH FESTIVAL late May-mid-Jul (Plovdiv) Major cultural celebration with music performances, dancing and opera, and exhibitions on Bulgarian art and literature.

JUNE

FIRE DANCING FESTIVAL early Jun (Bulgari, Strandzha Nature Park) Held in the first few days of June in the tiny village of Bulgari, this is a magical occasion, dedicated to Sts Konstantin and Elena, with fire-walking, music, wine and communal merriment.

FESTIVAL OF ROSES 1st weekend in Jun (Kazanlák, Karlovo and Shipka) Cheery community festival honouring the local flower crop, with street parades, dancing, concerts and the crowning of the Rose Queen.

VERDI FESTIVAL two weeks in early Jun (Plovdiv) Highly regarded annual event celebrating the music of the great Italian composer, with concerts arranged around town.

MADARA HORSEMAN INTERNATIONAL MUSIC DAYS FESTIVAL mid-Jun-mid-Jul (Madara) Held in the Unesco-listed archaeological reserve, with an impressive programme of orchestral performances.

INTERNATIONAL FESTIVAL OF RELIGIOUS MUSIC mid-Jun (Veliko Tárnovo) A feast of ecclesiastical choral music in the dramatic setting of the city's medieval fortress.

INTERNATIONAL FOLKLORE FESTIVAL three weeks in late Jun-mid-Jul (Veliko Tárnovo) A colourful event regularly attracting hundreds of performers from across the country, with shows of traditional dance and music.

JULY

BALKANFOLK last two weeks of Jul (Bankya, near Sofia) Major international gathering for everyone interested in Balkan traditions, with music, dance and language classes and workshops for the very keen.

AUGUST

INTERNATIONAL FOLK FESTIVAL every five years (Koprivshitsa) One of the biggest festivals of its kind in Bulgaria, attracting thousands of dancers, musicians and folk ensembles. Next staged in 2010.

INTERNATIONAL JAZZ FESTIVAL 7-15 Aug (Bansko) Jazz musicians from all across Europe play in free concerts staged in the main square.

THRACIA SUMMER MUSIC FESTIVAL early-mid-Aug (Plovdiv and other towns in Bulgarian Thrace) Traditional tunes played in venues in the old town, with concerts also staged in Stara Zagora and Chirpan.

FOLKLORE DAYS FESTIVAL mid-Aug (Koprivshitsa) Another of Bulgaria's many lively and sociable festivals dedicated to traditional music and dancing.

PIRIN SINGS FOLK FESTIVAL mid-Aug
(Bansko) Annual event bringing together thousands of traditional musicians, choirs and dancers from the Pirin region, with a larger gathering every four years (the next is in 2009).

WATERMELON FESTIVAL mid-Aug
(Salmanovo, Shumen region) A celebration of rural life in this village outside Shumen, featuring music, dancing, watermelon carving and watermelon seed spitting contests.

MILK FESTIVAL last weekend in Aug
(Smilyan) Near Smolyan. Local bovines compete for the coveted title of 'Miss Cow' in this celebration of all things dairy.

INTERNATIONAL FOLKLORE FESTIVAL late Aug
(Burgas) Festive street parades, craft workshops, music concerts and dance performances bring international colour to the seaside.

ANNUAL INTERNATIONAL FILM FESTIVAL one week, late Aug-early Sep
(Varna) Art house and independent films from across the world get a rare screening.

SEPTEMBER

CITY HOLIDAY 6 Sep
(Plovdiv) A civic celebration of the day back in 1885 when Plovdiv, along with the province of Eastern Rumelia, was finally reunited with the rest of Bulgaria.

PIRIN FOLK NATIONAL FESTIVAL early Sep
(Sandanski) Yet another high-spirited, regional celebration of traditional musical and Terpsichorean talent.

PLOVDIV JAZZ NIGHTS early Sep
(Plovdiv) Highly regarded international gathering of jazz masters, with performances and jam sessions around the city.

APOLLONIA ARTS FESTIVAL 1st half of Sep
(Sozopol) A huge festival of music, drama and dance that attracts big names and national TV coverage.

SCENE AT THE CROSSROADS THEATRE FESTIVAL 13 days in mid-Sep
(Plovdiv) Yearly drama gala featuring theatrical groups from Bulgaria and abroad.

INTERNATIONAL SHORT FILM FESTIVAL one week in late Sep
(Balchik) A filmic fest offering a rare chance to view screenings of low-budget independent movies.

INTERNATIONAL PLOVDIV FAIR one week in late Sep
(Plovdiv) The city welcomes another round of trade, craft and industry fairs.

INTERNATIONAL PUPPET THEATRE FESTIVAL late Sep
(Stara Zagora) The city's State Puppet Theatre hosts performances, workshops, exhibitions, seminars, and street art with professional puppeteers from around the world.

OCTOBER

DAYS OF RUSE early Oct
(Ruse) Yearly cultural festival focusing on music, dancing and drama performances.

FAIR DAY 14 Oct
(Etâr) Held in the Ethnographic Museum, featuring demonstrations of regional music and dancing.

FEAST OF ST JOHN OF RILA 19 Oct
(Rila Monastery) Ivan Rilski, the monastery's revered patron saint, is honoured with religious services and sacred music.

CARNIVAL OF FERTILITY biannual
(Shumen) Local folk traditions are celebrated with a masked carnival, flower and vegetable shows and a craft fair.

NOVEMBER

CINEMANIA FILM FESTIVAL all month
(Sofia) The National Palace of Culture (NDK) hosts a well-attended movie gala, with screenings of new independent films from around the world.

DECEMBER

YOUNG RED WINE FESTIVAL early Dec
(Sandanski) The vine harvest is celebrated with numerous events including music concerts and wine tastings.

Itineraries

CLASSIC ROUTES

CITIES, CULTURE & SEASIDE

Two to Three Weeks

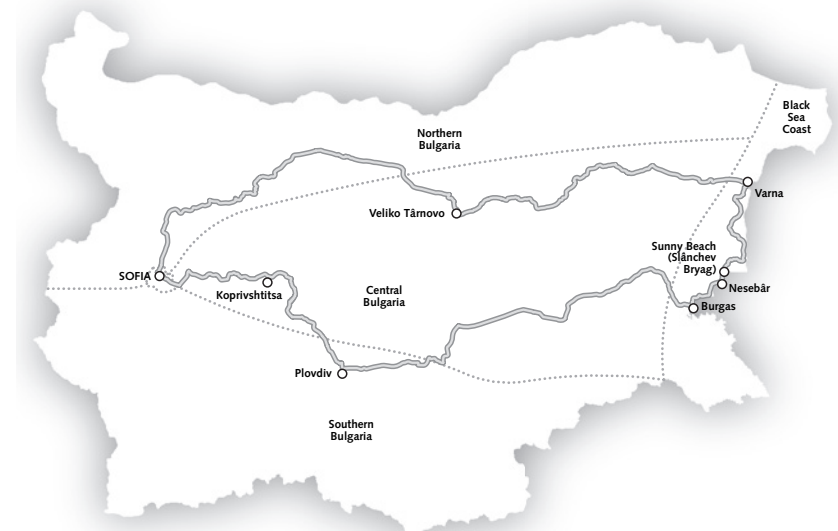
Start off in the capital, **Sofia** (p82), with its excellent museums and galleries, expansive parks and Bulgaria's best restaurant and nightlife scene. For a complete contrast, take the train to the beautifully restored village of **Koprivshitsa** (p191), a stunning spot filled with gorgeous National Revival-era house-museums. It's a peaceful spot to stay for a day or two.

From here, take a bus to busy **Plovdiv** (p138), where you can easily pass a couple of days browsing through the art galleries, exploring the Roman remains or just taking it easy at one of the many street cafés.

From Plovdiv, make for the Black Sea coast and stop overnight in the bustling city of **Burgas** (p213) before heading up to **Nesebär** (p229), famed for its beautiful medieval churches. Spend a few days here, maybe taking a day trip to **Sunny Beach** (Slánchev Bryag; p235) for a spot of sunbathing, then continue up the coast towards **Varna** (p237). This city's superb Archaeological Museum and Roman Thermae are definitely worth a visit, while the beach-front promenade has some of the best bars and clubs on the coast.

Start back westwards, stopping at historic **Veliko Tàrnovo** (p170) on the way; its ancient fortress is unmissable and the views fantastic. Spend at least one night here before returning to Sofia.

Two weeks is not a lot of time to see all that Bulgaria has to offer, but it's enough to give you a taster, and maybe help you decide where you'd like to return to at a later date.



MONASTERIES & MOUNTAINS

One Week

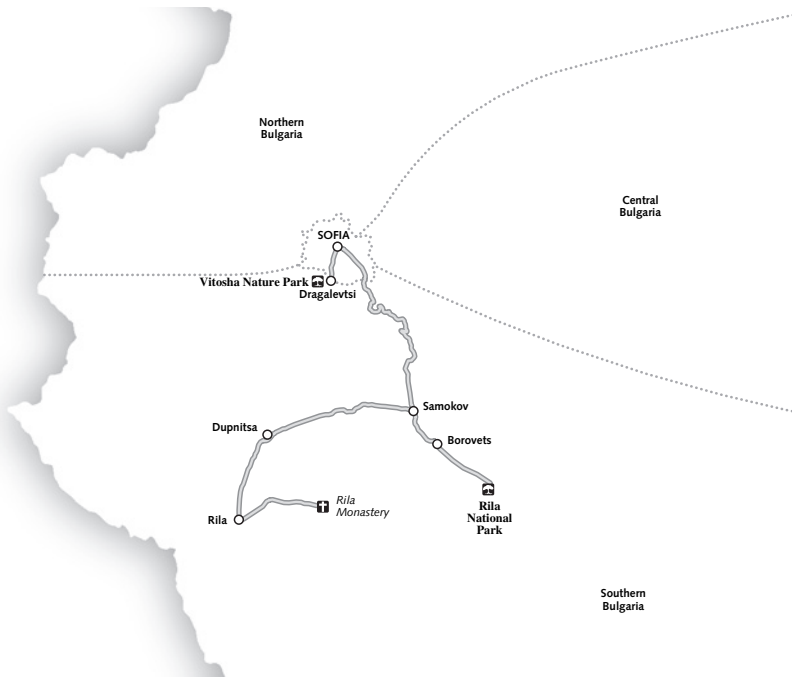
From Sofia, head out to **Dragalevtsi** (p109) in **Vitosha Nature Park** (p109), just on the outskirts of the city. Take a peek at the much-revered Dragalevtsi Monastery, and then take the chairlift up to Goli Vrah. Depending on the season you can then go walking or skiing in the Mt Vitosha range, which affords some spectacular views back over Sofia, weather permitting.

The following day, take a minibus from Sofia for the short journey to **Samokov** (p119), looking over its History Museum and mosque, then catch another minibus to Bulgaria's burgeoning ski mega-resort at **Borovets** (p120). Again, depending on the time of year, you can either slip on your skis and take to the slopes or, in summer, go hiking in the beautiful **Rila National Park** (p115), south of town.

After whiling away a few days in Borovets, return to Samokov for a connecting minibus to Dupnitsa, where you can get another bus to the village of **Rila** (p116). Here you can either stay overnight in the village's sole hotel, or else at one of the places near **Rila Monastery** (p117), just a short bus ride away. This spectacular monastery is the holiest pilgrimage site in Bulgaria, and is one of the country's most visited attractions. Try to ignore the inevitable tour buses and snap-happy crowds and just admire the stunning wall frescoes and beautiful architecture of the place.

From Rila village, you can catch a bus back to Sofia.

This quick trip will give you a good idea of the attractions around the capital and the conveniently close hiking and skiing areas, and take you to Bulgaria's holiest pilgrimage destination, Rila Monastery.



ROADS LESS TRAVELLED

THE NORTHERN LINE

Two Weeks

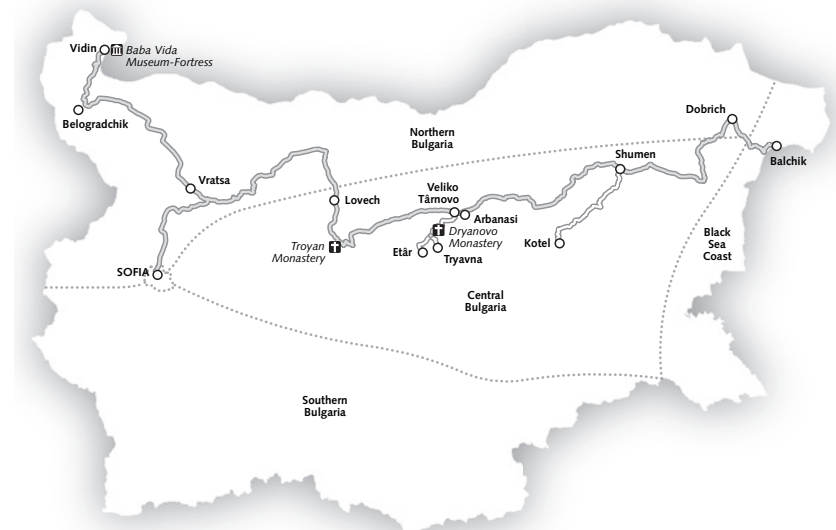
Starting at Sofia, head north by train to **Vidin** (p257), where you can stay overnight, see the Danube and visit the **Baba Vida Museum-Fortress** (p257). From here, travel south to gorgeous **Belogradchik** (p261), where you can explore the even more interesting fortress and see the fantastic Belogradchik rocks.

The next day, continue by train to **Vratsa** (p265) and spend a day walking in the nearby mountains before moving on to **Lovech** (p188). The old town is a great place to explore and you can make an excursion to nearby **Troyan Monastery** (p190) to see some of Bulgaria's best fresco painting.

Next, travel to **Veliko Tarnovo** (p170), where, instead of staying in the town, you could enjoy a relaxing few days in nearby **Arbanasi** (p179). Take time to visit the **Etar complex** (p187) and other local attractions, such as **Tryavna** (p183) or the **Dryanovo Monastery** (p182), before heading on to **Shumen** (p165). Here you'll find the most intricately decorated mosque in Bulgaria as well as another great fortress. You could also take an interesting excursion from here to **Kotel** (p209).

Carry on to **Dobrich** (p277), which has an excellent open-air ethnological museum. Finally, head to the Black Sea and the off-the-beaten-track destination of **Balchik** (p251). This lovely place makes for a total contrast to the resorts further down the coast, and while there isn't a great beach, the swimming is still good and there's the superb botanical gardens and Queen Marie's palace to visit.

This trip takes you across the often neglected northern region of Bulgaria, beginning in the far northwest at Vidin on the Danube and ending up at charming Balchik on the Black Sea.



SOUTHERN SPLENDOUR

Two Weeks

Start off in Sofia, and take the bus down to **Blagoevgrad** (p124), which, though it might not be brimming over with sights, is a lively provincial town and a convenient overnight stop. From here, travel on to **Sandanski** (p131), birthplace of Spartacus and a popular and sunny spa town. The town makes an ideal base for a day trip to nearby **Melnik** (p134), famous for its wine and its bizarre sand pyramids, and you could also, perhaps, carry on to **Rozhen Monastery** (p137).

From Sandanski you can catch a bus to the charming mountain town of **Bansko** (p127): outside the tourist high seasons in winter and midsummer, it's a quiet, laid-back place to rest up. The more energetic can take advantage of the excellent hiking country nearby.

Continue by bus to **Plovdiv** (p138). Bulgaria's second city is worth a few days' stopover, with one of the country's best preserved old towns and a host of art galleries to visit. The lovely **Bachkovo Monastery** (p153) is also an easy day trip from Plovdiv.

Head south to **Smolyan** (p158), Bulgaria's highest (and longest) town. The climate here is often cool and refreshing, and the town has an excellent historical museum. Take a day trip to nearby **Shiroka Lúka** (p160), a typically charming Rodopian village famed for its *kukeri* festival and humpbacked bridges. Carry on to the spa town of **Devin** (p160), where you can indulge in some hydrotherapy or a massage. This peaceful little town makes a great base for visiting the spectacular caves at **Trigrad** (p162) and **Yagodina** (p163). You can then head back to Sofia either directly or via Plovdiv.

Following this route, you'll get away from the main tourist centres and see southern Bulgaria at its best.



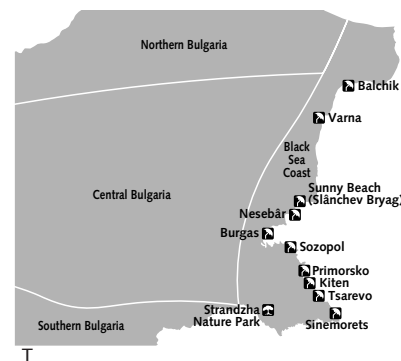
TAILORED TRIPS

DOWN THE COAST

As well as the huge beach resorts, this trip will take you to small coastal villages, ancient peninsula towns and charming Varna.

Head first to **Varna** (p237), and spend a few days here to take advantage of the city's many charms, including the excellent Archaeological Museum, lively beachfront and the attractive Primorski Park. Take a day trip north to **Balchik** (p251) for a snoop round the summer palace and botanical gardens, and from Varna head south to scenic, if over-commercialised, **Nesebâr** (p229). Stay either in the old town or in the nearby package-tour resort of **Sunny Beach** (Slánchev Bryag; p235), where you'll also find a great beach and plenty of water sports.

From here, go south to **Burgas** (p213) to soak in its laid-back, Mediterranean atmosphere, then carry on to **Sozopol** (p220) by bus. Spend a couple of days here exploring the old town and enjoying the town's two beaches. Further south, head to **Primorsko** (p225) or **Kiten** (p226), both of which have long, sandy beaches ideal for families, or go a little further to **Tsarevo** (p226) for quieter, uncommercial beach life. If time permits, head to **Sinemorets** (p228) with its access to the **Strandzha Nature Park** (p227) and its two beaches, some of the quietest on the entire Bulgarian coast.



THE UNESCO HERITAGE TOUR

This tour takes you to nearly all of Bulgaria's Unesco World Heritage sites. Some are awkward to reach by public transport; see relevant sections for details. From Sofia, take a day trip to the suburb of Boyana, and the delightful **Boyana Church** (p108) with its 13th-century murals. Going south, call by the splendid **Rila Monastery** (p117) on a (long) day trip from Sofia, or from Blagoevgrad. It's the country's largest monastery, and a true highlight. The **Pirin National Park** (p124), best explored via Bansko, offers numerous walking trails and remarkable scenery.

Travelling east to Kazanlák, you'll come upon the **Thracian Tomb of Kazanlák** (p200). The tomb, dating from the 4th century BC, is open to the public.

Going northwards, the impressive **Ivanovo Rock Monastery** (p274) is inside the Rusenski Lom Nature Park, near Ruse, and the **Srebârna Nature Reserve** (p274) is best reached from Silistra. Get a bus down to Shumen, from where it's possible to visit the **Madara Horseman** (p169), an 8th-century cliff carving.

Finally, head to Varna, then down the coast to picturesque **Nesebâr** (p229), the last stop on the Unesco trail.



OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES

This tour takes in most of Bulgaria's best outdoor activities. From Sofia, head south to the Rila Mountains, where you can hike to the magical **Seven Rila Lakes** (p123), sleeping in mountain huts along the way in summer; in winter, ski the venerable resort of **Borovets** (p120) nearby. Further south, the Pirin Mountains also boast great skiing at **Bansko** (p127) and vast acres of untamed wilderness for hikers.

From here continue east to Plovdiv, and drop down into the Rodopi Mountains for more hiking and some therapeutic dips in the mineral hot baths of **Devin** (p160); Devin's also a good base for visiting Bulgaria's best caves, at **Yagodina** and **Trigrad** (p162). Returning to Plovdiv, continue north to Veliko Tàrnovo, where you can arrange horse riding through rolling meadows and forests in nearby **Arbanasi** (p179).



Continuing north, stop off at swinging Ruse on the Danube to explore the **Rusenski Lom Nature Park** (p273), home to both rare bird species and unique cliff monasteries. Head further east along the river to reach **Lake Srebàrna** (p274), Bulgaria's best spot for blissful bird-watching, or try your hand at fly-fishing at nearby **Vetren** (p274).

In summer, it's obligatory to end up on the Black Sea coast, for swimming and sailing at **Albena** (p249) or the quieter beach at **Kavarna** (p254).

WINE ROUTES

This tour takes you through Bulgaria's most famous wine-producing regions, and to wineries where you can sample some of the country's best vino. Start in Varna, at the sumptuous **Chateau Euxinograde** (p66). Here, at the former Bulgarian royal palace, you can marvel at its century-old wine cellar while sampling a delicate white from the Black Sea coastal plain. From here, head west along the Danube to atmospheric **Ruse** (p267), where you can try a glass or two of northern Bulgaria's signature red, Gamza, along with dinner in one of the excellent local restaurants.

Next, head south to the lively city of Plovdiv; in Brestovitsa, 15km further south, seek out **Todoroff Wine Cellars** (p67), makers of some of the country's best Mavrud (a classic Bulgarian red). Returning to Plovdiv, continue west towards Pazardzhik, turning off at Ognyanovo village, home of the sophisticated, foreign-owned **Bessa Valley Vineyards winery** (p67). Terrific tasting tours here include the winery's award-winning Merlot and Cabernet Sauvignon blends.



The final part of the tour takes you to Bulgaria's southwestern corner, and the likeable village of **Melnik** (p134), nestled between cliffs and bursting with medieval ruins. The village's 600-year-old tradition of producing the full-bodied Shiroka Melnishka Loza red is celebrated with tastings held in cave cellars, wine museums and sunny garden restaurants. For further information on Bulgarian wine, see p63.

On The Road



RICHARD WATKINS Coordinating Author

I studied ancient history at university, so I'm always drawn to brooding archaeological sites like the impressive Roman Thermae (p240) at Varna. I've been there a few times now, but it's still a great place to explore, even on a baking hot day. There were only a couple of other visitors ambling around when I was there, and I managed to get myself locked in after the caretaker decided to knock off early – but luckily there's a back way out, over some pointy railings. I'm taking a break on some recumbent entablature here (who wouldn't?), possibly in the *frigidarium* (cold-water pool) area. If only it was still there.



CHRISTOPHER DELISO After marvelling at the sublime frescoes at the Basarbovo and Ivanovo cliff monasteries, we drove through the heat to Cherven (p274), a dusty, untroubled village that's home to a key medieval fortress. A cheery old couple foisted large bunches of homegrown white grapes upon us. They were especially delicious after the arduous climb up to the fortress, where ancient rulers surveyed their dominions; from here we could see Cherven's red roofs extending beneath us to one side, and the bleak, beautiful expanse of Rusenski Lom Nature Park outstretched to the other, as far as the eye could see.

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