

History

The land that gave birth to the legendary Orpheus and Spartacus, Bulgaria is a country with a long, tumultuous and fascinating history. It has been invaded, conquered and settled by Greeks, Scythians, Romans, Byzantines and Turks, all of whom left their indelible marks on the landscape. Bulgaria's medieval 'Golden Age', when the Bulgar Khans ruled over one of the largest empires in Europe, was bright but brief, while 500 years of subsequent, brutal Turkish domination isolated the country from the rest of Europe. More recently, Bulgaria spent four decades as a totalitarian Soviet satellite, again leaving this small Balkan nation in the shadows as far as the Western world was concerned. It's no wonder, then, that Bulgarians are so passionate about preserving their history and their culture, which has survived so often against the odds. In the last years of the 20th century Bulgaria began opening up, and is one of the newest members of the EU.

The Shortest History of Bulgaria by Nikolay Ovcharov runs quickly through the highpoints of Bulgaria's past, cramming a lot of interesting facts into just 70 brightly illustrated pages.

BEGINNINGS

Excavations of caves near Pleven (in the Danubian plains in northern Bulgaria) and in the Balkan Mountains have indicated human habitation as far back as the Upper Palaeolithic Period around 40,000 BC. However, archaeologists now believe that the earliest permanent settlers, arriving around 6000 BC, were Neolithic people who lived in caves, such as at Yagodina in the southern Rodopi Mountains (p162) and later, between about 5500 BC and 4500 BC, in round mud huts. The best preserved examples are on show in Stara Zagora (see p204). Burnt grain found here indicates these people were farmers. Chalcolithic (copper-using) cultures developed during the fourth millennium BC, and a superb collection of artefacts from this period, including possibly the earliest worked gold jewellery ever discovered, is on show at Varna Archaeological Museum (p240).

A Concise History of Bulgaria by RJ Crampton is a scholarly and comprehensive overview of the country's history from prehistoric times up to the present day.

TRIBAL TIMES

The Greek historian Herodotus tells us that the population of Thrace was 'greater than that of any country in the world except India', and that if the various tribes ever united under a single leader, then they would be the most powerful nation on earth; history, of course, tells us that they never did get their act together. Several tribes, who collectively came to be known as the Thracians, settled in modern-day Bulgaria, and in the early stages built settlements based around cave systems and near springs, which they considered sacred. As time went by, they built larger, more permanent villages around rudimentary fortresses, placed on elevated sites for defence.

TIMELINE

6000–5000 BC

Bulgaria's earliest permanent inhabitants establish settlements in and around caves during the Neolithic period. By around 5000 BC, the caves have been abandoned in favour of mud huts, and farming develops.

4000–1000 BC

The warlike and disparate Thracian tribes dominate the region covered by modern-day Bulgaria, creating settlements such as Mesembria on the Black Sea coast around 3000 BC and expanding into Greece and Anatolia by 2000 BC.

611 BC

Greek settlers from the city-state of Miletus establish Apollonia Pontica (Sozopol) on the Black Sea coast. It is the first classically democratic state on Bulgarian territory, with all males over the age of 18 eligible to vote for the governing assembly.

HERITAGE OF THE THRACIANS

The ancient Thracians, who once ruled over modern-day Bulgaria, are, in many ways, a mysterious and misunderstood people. Magnificent treasures such as the Varna necropolis treasure, on show in Varna's Archaeological Museum (p240) and the Panagyurishte Treasure (p108) in Sofia's National Museum of History suggest that this was a rich and sophisticated society, while major recent discoveries have cast new light on these tribes, surprising historians both in Bulgaria and overseas and forcing a rethink on their murky civilisation. In 2004, archaeologists unearthed two Thracian gravesites, both around 2400 years old, near Shipka and Kazanlák, an area which has become known as the Valley of the Thracian Kings due to the concentration of rich royal burials found there. One tomb yielded a solid gold mask, thought to represent the Thracian ruler Teres, and resembling the mask of Agamemnon from Mycenae, and a superb bronze portrait head, possibly of King Sevt III – a masterpiece of Hellenistic art – was discovered in the other. Both are now on display in Sofia's Archaeological Museum (p91).

Excavations, headed by the respected archaeologist Dr Georgi Kitov, have continued apace and several new tombs, and more fabulous artefacts, have been brought to light around the country, most recently around Sliven in 2007, where another regal golden mask was found. Perhaps even more intriguingly, archaeologists now claim to have identified the ruins of the famed Oracle of Dionysus at Perperikon, near Kárdzhali, where Alexander the Great was informed that he would become master of Asia, and the tomb of Orpheus, at Tatul near the Turkish border. Unfortunately, the archaeologists have to work fast to contend with looters once sites are discovered, but it is hoped that this amazing Thracian heritage will become a big tourist draw in years to come. See www.ancient-bulgaria.com for more information on Bulgaria's Thracian treasures.

Among the more powerful tribes were the Serdi, who settled around modern Sofia; the Getae, who lived along the Danube in northeastern Bulgaria; and the Odrysi, from the eastern Rodopi region. Despite their constant quarrels, the Thracian tribes shared much in common, and were feared and respected by outsiders as great warriors and horsemen: the fierce Thracian weaponry displayed at archaeological museums around the country will give you an inkling of what potential invaders were up against. The Greek historian Polybius wrote in the 2nd century BC of the 'insoluble state of war' between the Thracians and the Greeks of the city-state of Byzantium. It was impossible, he says, to gain a decisive victory over these 'barbarians', or to end the fighting, due to their sheer numbers: 'If the Byzantines overcome one chieftain, three others still more formidable invade his territory'.

They worshipped many gods, but were particularly devoted to Dionysus, whom they celebrated in orgiastic rites, and believed in an afterlife. Greek chroniclers regarded the Thracians' customs with disdain, though were not averse to reporting the racier aspects of their lives. We are told that they practised polygamy and that their young women were encouraged to be sexually promiscuous before marriage, while the historian Strabo comments on one

tribe's use of inhaled intoxicants (probably burning hemp seeds). Tales of their lurid tattoos also wrinkled many an Athenian nose.

Far from being the bloodthirsty savages portrayed by classical authors, though, the Thracians were accomplished artists and farmers, and grew wealthy from trading jewellery, copper and gold. Recent archaeological excavations around Shipka in central Bulgaria have unearthed some astounding works of art, including the gold mask and bronze head of a Thracian king, now on show at Sofia's Archaeological Museum (p91).

The Thracians significantly influenced the religion, architecture and culture of the subsequent Roman and Greek rulers. Some geographical names used today, such as 'rila' (for Rila Monastery) and 'yantra' (the name of the river through Veliko Tárnovo) probably originate from Thracian words.

Thracian Reminders

Remains of Thracian settlements can be found along the Black Sea coast near Burgas and at the town of Mesembria (Nesebár), while other remnants can be found on Nebet Tepe in Plovdiv, where the Thracians built the fortress of Eumolpias in about 5000 BC (see p141). Other Thracian settlements grew into the modern-day towns of Stara Zagora, Sandanski, Melnik, Bansko, Smolyan, Shumen and Madara.

By the first millennium BC the Thracians had spread as far north as Cherven, near the Danube, and as far west as Sofia. One tribe known as the Serdi created Sardonopolis, which was later renamed Serdica, and subsequently became Sofia, today's capital city.

The most famous Thracian remains are the tombs dating from about 4000 BC, which are displayed in the excellent Archaeological Museum in Varna (see p240) and the tomb at Kazanlák built in the 4th century BC (see p200). Close by, the area around Shipka has been termed the Valley of the Thracian Kings due to its high concentration of Thracian burial mounds. Other Thracian artefacts can be seen in museums in Haskovo, Smolyan, Sofia and Sliven.

Legend tells that Orpheus, the semimythical musician and underworld explorer, was born in Thrace, near the modern-day village of Gela (see the boxed text, p34), while Spartacus, his famous fellow Thracian who led a slave revolt against the Romans in Sicily, came from the vicinity of modern Sandanski.

ARRIVAL OF THE GREEKS...

From the 7th century BC onwards, enterprising Greeks sailed up the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria seeking out good harbours and trade opportunities, and founded settlements including Apollonia Pontica (modern-day Sozopol), Odessos (Varna), Mesembria (Nesebár), Krounoi (Balchik) and Pirgos (Burgas). They established large ports for exporting wheat, fish and salt, and traded Greek pottery for Thracian metalwork and jewellery.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Thracian Getae tribe would send 'messengers' to their god, Salmoxis, by hurling them onto a row of upturned spears.

Bulgarians: Civilisers of the Slavs by Bojidar Dimitrov is a small and readable, but somewhat biased, telling of the country's religious and cultural history. It's also available in French and German.

The Valley of the Thracian Rulers by Georgi Kitov is an up-to-date account of the fascinating archaeological discoveries made in central Bulgaria in recent years, with some beautiful colour photographs.

335 BC

Macedonian king Alexander the Great extends the Thracian holdings of his father Philip II by marching to the Danube River, securing it as the northernmost border of his massive empire.

AD 46

Thrace falls under the sway of the Roman Empire and is carved up into the administrative provinces of Thrace (in the south) and Moesia (in the north), with Ulpia Serdica (modern-day Sofia) becoming capital of Inner Dacia.

293

Roman Emperor Diocletian establishes the 'Tetrarchy' (rule of four), radically reorganising Imperial administration. Regional 'capitals' are established, including Serdica (Sofia), which flourishes as a centre of government and trade.

443–47

Attila the Hun and his army cross the Danube, sweeping into Roman territory and sacking the cities of Serdica (Sofia) and Philipopolis (Plovdiv) before being paid off with gold by the emperor.

681

The First Bulgarian Empire is founded by Khan Asparuh, with its capital at Pliska. Expanded under Khan Tervel (701–18), it reaches its largest extent under the rule of Tsar Simeon (893–927) before settling into a slow decline.

855

Saints Kiril and Metodii create the Glagolic alphabet to help promote Christianity through the Bulgarian lands and beyond. It subsequently develops into the Cyrillic script.

ORPHEUS IN THRACE

The legend of Orpheus, the semidivine lyre-player and singer, was one of the most popular and enduring in antiquity, even spawning a 'mystery cult' in Greece and elsewhere in the Hellenistic world, but it is thought that the original Orpheus was a real person, born somewhere in the neighbourhood of Gela, north of Shiroka Lúka. His story is well known: his music soothed men, beasts and even trees, he travelled with Jason and the Argonauts in search of the Golden Fleece, when his lyre-plucking helpfully drowned out the alluring wails of the Sirens, and, of course, he descended into the underworld to rescue his dead wife, Eurydice, from the clutches of Hades. Having lost her again at the last moment, Orpheus spent the rest of his days wandering around the Rodopi Mountains, until his mournful singing drove the Bacchantes (ecstatic female devotees of Dionysus) to tear him into pieces and dump his dismembered remains in the river. Harsh critics indeed. It is said that his blood splattered, and permanently stained, the endemic Rodopian flower, the *silivriak* (see p71).

The Greeks avoided most of southern and central Bulgaria because the belligerent Thracians had settled there in large numbers; estimates suggest that during the first millennium BC the Thracians outnumbered the Greeks by four to one between the Danube and the Aegean.

Only a few towns away from the Black Sea show any evidence of Greek settlement. These include Pataulia (Kyustendil), southwest of Sofia, and Silistra on the Danube in northern Bulgaria.

However, the Greeks did have a profound influence on religion, arts and culture throughout the Balkans for over 900 years. The Greek language was used extensively by non-Greeks for business, administration and education. The Bulgarian language still has many words of Greek origin, and the patriarch of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church was based in Athens for centuries. Towns such as Sozopol, Melnik and Sandanski still had large Greek populations at the beginning of the 20th century.

In the middle of the 4th century BC, the Macedonians, under the leadership of Philip II, and later his son, Alexander the Great, conquered all of Thrace. Philip made his capital at Philipopolis (Plovdiv), which developed into an important military outpost, while Odessos (Varna) and modern-day Sofia were also occupied. Macedonian rule was to be brief, though, and they soon had the might of Rome to contend with.

...AND THE ROMANS

The Romans defeated the Macedonian Empire in 168 BC, but it wasn't until the middle of the 1st century AD that they began making inroads into the territory of the Thracians, occupying major Greek ports such as Mesembria (Nesebâr). They set up a base at Odessos (Varna), where the largest Roman ruins in Bulgaria, the great Roman Thermae complex, can still be seen (see p240).

The Rose of the Balkans – A Short History of Bulgaria by Ivan Ilchev offers an up-to-date, detailed survey of the country's colourful history, with a selection of photographs.

By AD 46 the Romans had conquered the entire Balkan Peninsula, and the territory of modern-day Bulgaria was initially divided into the provinces of Thrace, in the south, and Moesia, in the north. To shore up vital defensive lines, the Romans built numerous military strongholds and fortified major Thracian and Greek towns along the Danube at Ruse and Bononia (Vidin), and at Debelus (Burgas) along the Black Sea coast. Although they burned and looted the major Greek settlement of Apollonia, the Romans rebuilt it to become a vital port within the Roman Empire.

The Romans established Ulpia Serdica (Sofia) as the capital of their province of Inner Dacia (northwestern Bulgaria); the most visible reminder of their presence that still stands is the Sveti Georgi Rotunda, or Church of St George (p91). Other towns founded by the Romans, or built on existing settlements of the Thracians, Greeks and Macedonians, include Sevtopolis (Kazanlak), Ulpia Augusta Trajana (Stara Zagora), Nikopolis-ad-Istrum (situated north of Veliko Târnovo) and Trimontium (Plovdiv), where a magnificent amphitheatre was built that's still used for performances today (see p141). By the late 3rd century AD, Ulpia Serdica had become a major regional imperial capital, where Diocletian and subsequent emperors held court.

Remnants of Roman settlements can be admired in many places, even as far west as Belogradchik. In central Bulgaria, the Romans were the first to build a real fortress on top of Tsarevets Hill in Veliko Târnovo (see p171). They built extensive walls, which partially still stand, at Hisarya (Hisar; see p196) to protect valuable fresh water sources.

Goths, Visigoths, Vandals, Huns and a distressing array of other 'barbarian' tribes began descending on the Roman provinces of Bulgaria from the 3rd century AD onwards, causing much havoc, although such raids were sporadic and short-lived.

HOLY ALPHABET

Born in Thessaloniki in the early 9th century to a noble Byzantine family, the brothers Kiril (Cyril) and Metodii (Methodius) were scholars and monks who studied and worked throughout the Balkans. They are revered in Bulgaria for developing, around 855, the first Bulgarian alphabet, called Glagolitic, which was thought to better represent the sounds of the Bulgarian language than the Greek alphabet, which had previously been in use. It was later simplified by one of their disciples, Clement, and became known as the Cyrillic alphabet. But, more importantly, they helped spread Orthodox Christianity throughout the Balkans by promoting the use of Slavic as the fourth official language of the Church (after Latin, Greek and Hebrew).

The Cyrillic alphabet is now used in Bulgaria, Russia, Macedonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Serbia and Mongolia. Bulgarians even celebrate Cyrillic Alphabet Day (also known as the Day of Bulgarian Culture) on 24 May.

DID YOU KNOW?

Bogomilism was a 10th-century Bulgarian heresy based on the notion of two deities, one good, one evil. A similar creed surfaced in France, where it was known as Catharism.

865

Orthodox Christianity is adopted as the official state religion by Khan Boris, who retires in 889. Four years later he suppresses his ruling son Vladimir's attempts to reinstate paganism by deposing and blinding him.

917

Boris' second son, Tsar Simeon, leads a decisive victory over the Byzantines at the Battle of Acheloi, making the Bulgarian Empire the greatest power in Europe.

972

The Bulgarian capital, Veliki Preslav, is captured and burnt to the ground by the Byzantines, forcing the Bulgarians to de-camp to Ohrid, their capital until its loss several decades later to the Byzantine Empire.

1014

Fifteen thousand Bulgarian soldiers are captured and, according to gory legend, blinded by Byzantine Emperor Basil II (later nicknamed 'the Bulgar Slayer') and sent back to Tsar Samuel.

1018

The Bulgarian capital city of Ohrid is finally captured by the advancing Byzantine Empire, and Bulgaria loses its independence for almost 170 years.

1185–1396

Successfully rising up against the Byzantine Empire, aristocratic brothers Asen and Petâr establish the Second Bulgarian Empire, making Veliko Târnovo its capital city. Tsar Ivan Asen II (1218–41) expands Bulgaria's borders.

The Byzantine Commonwealth by Dimitri Obolensky presents a detailed and erudite survey of the development of Byzantine culture in the medieval Balkans.

DID YOU KNOW?

The 9th-century Bulgar ruler Khan Krum 'The Dreadful' earned his sobriquet from his fierceness in battle and his collection of enemy skulls – including that of Byzantine Emperor Nicephorus – which he used as wine goblets.

The Legend of Basil the Bulgar-Slayer by Paul Stephenson offers a scholarly reinterpretation of the medieval Byzantine emperor and his campaigns in Bulgaria.

BYZANTINES & BULGARS

In 330 the city of Constantinople (modern Istanbul) was founded by the Roman emperor Constantine the Great on the site of ancient Byzantium, and was declared the capital of the Eastern Roman Empire. The division of the empire meant that the Bulgarian provinces were now ruled from that city. By the late 4th century, the Western Roman Empire fell apart, but the East continued for another thousand years, as the Byzantine Empire. The 6th-century rule of Emperor Justinian the Great was a relatively peaceful time for Bulgaria – Sofia's original Church of Sveta Sofia (p91) was built at this time – but the following centuries saw growing numbers of Slavs, Avars and Bulgars breaching the empire's borders.

In 632 the numerous Bulgar tribes, whose territories stretched from the Black Sea to the Caspian Sea, were united under the overlordship of Khan Kubrat, and by the middle of the 7th century they had moved into the land of modern-day Bulgaria. The Byzantines, unable to cope with the vast influx, allowed them to stay. This fierce Turkic tribe settled throughout the region, subjugating and integrating with the Slavs and the remaining Thracians.

Khan (Tsar) Asparuh (r 681–700) was responsible for establishing what became known as the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018), creating a capital at Pliska, near modern-day Shumen. The empire expanded south and west under Khan Tervel (r 701–718) and was revered for repelling an Arab advance on Constantinople.

Conflict between Byzantium and the Bulgars continued over the centuries, with Khan Krum 'The Dreadful' (r 803–814) besieging Constantinople after the Byzantines burnt down Pliska.

Golden Times

The 9th century was Bulgaria's apogee in many ways, with several tsars expanding the kingdom's territory: Khan Omurtag (r 814–831) captured Hungary in 829, and by the end of Khan Presian's reign (r 837–852) the Bulgarian state encompassed a huge swath of southeastern Europe, including modern-day Romania, Moldova and Macedonia.

In 865 Tsar Boris I (r 852–889) tried to unify the fledgling Bulgar-Slav Empire by converting it to Christianity. At about this time, an independent church was established and a Slavonic alphabet devised by two monks, Kiril and Metodii, known in English as Cyril and Methodius (see the boxed text, p35).

Boris retired to a monastery in 889, leaving his son Vladimir in control, but was roused out of retirement by Vladimir's attempts to restore paganism. Boris deposed his son, blinding him as extra punishment, and his younger brother Simeon (r 893–927) ascended the throne. The empire reached its zenith under Tsar Simeon, who transferred the capital to Veliki Preslav and ushered in a cultural golden age. The Bulgarian Empire, which stretched

from the Adriatic Sea to the Aegean Sea and to the Dnieper River (northeast of Bulgaria) was the largest and most powerful in Europe at that time, and the powerful Bulgarian army routed the invading Byzantines at the Battle of Acheloi (near Nesebâr) in 917.

Decline & Fall

Tsar Peter's reign (r 927–968) was long and peaceful, but internal conflicts led to its decline. In 971 Preslav fell to the Byzantines and Tsar Samuel (r 978–1014) moved the capital to Ohrid (in modern-day Macedonia). At the Battle of Belasitsa in 1014, the Byzantines defeated the Bulgars; according to gory (but probably fanciful) legend, Emperor Basil II ('the Bulgar Slayer') ordered 15,000 Bulgarian soldiers to be blinded and marched back to Samuel, who promptly expired from grief (he actually died some months after the battle). In 1018 Ohrid fell, and Bulgaria officially became part of the Byzantine Empire.

In 1185 two aristocratic brothers, Asen and Petâr, led a general uprising against the Byzantines and the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396) was founded, with Veliko Târnovo as the capital.

In 1204 the Byzantines fell victim to the forces of the Fourth Crusade, whose leader, Baldwin of Flanders, declared himself emperor. Invading Bulgaria the following year, though, he was captured and spent the rest of his days imprisoned in a tower (which still bears his name) at the fortress in Veliko Târnovo (see p171).

LADISLAS & THE LAST CRUSADE

By the early 15th century, Bulgaria, Serbia and Transylvania had fallen to the advancing armies of the Ottoman Empire, Hungary looked vulnerable and things were looking increasingly bleak for beleaguered Byzantium. It seemed only a matter of time before the mighty Christian capital of Constantinople itself fell. It was within this desperate atmosphere that Pope Eugenius IV called for a crusade against the Turks, and in 1443 a 25,000-strong army under the leadership of King Ladislas of Hungary and Poland set sail from Venice. They scored early successes, sweeping through Serbia and taking Sofia, and in the summer of 1444, Sultan Murad II, who was facing insurrections on all sides of his empire, agreed to territorial concessions – including the return of Serbia – and a 10-year truce. The Pope and the other sponsors of the crusade were not happy with this arrangement, however, and forced Ladislas to break his agreement and continue the fight to push the Turks out of Europe altogether. It was to prove a disastrous mistake. With a smaller force, Ladislas marched across Bulgaria to Varna, hoping to meet up with a fleet carrying reinforcements. It never arrived. The sultan, with 80,000 men behind him, rushed up the coast: on 10 November 1444 they met the much smaller crusader army in the Battle of Varna. Ladislas was killed and his army almost entirely destroyed. Constantinople fell to the Turks just nine years later, and Ottoman expansion continued throughout the region. It would be centuries before the Balkans were free again.

DID YOU KNOW?

Peasant revolt leader Ivailo the Swineherd was crowned tsar in 1277. He claimed to be divinely inspired but was killed by the Tatars three years later, after fleeing a court coup.

1204

1381–95

1396

1444

1598

1686

Tsar Kaloyan gains papal support for the expansion of the Bulgarian Empire by converting to Roman Catholicism, but most Bulgarians remain loyal to the Orthodox Church. Kaloyan is murdered in a coup in 1207; the old religion is restored in 1232.

As the Bulgarian tsar's powers grow ever weaker, the brothers John and Constantine Dragash establish a short-lived independent principality based in Velbâzhhd (Kyustendil), covering southeastern Bulgaria and Macedonia.

Bulgaria's last native king, Tsar Ivan Shishman (1371–96), is defeated and the whole of Bulgaria is finally incorporated into the expansive Ottoman Empire, ushering in 500 years of harsh, feudal rule from Constantinople.

The Battle of Varna results in crushing defeat for an army largely composed of Hungarians and Serbs by a much larger Turkish force. It is the last battle of the last crusade against the Ottomans.

Religious and civic leaders head the First Târnovo Uprising against Turkish rule, briefly liberating Veliko Târnovo and crowning a new tsar, but the revolt is brutally crushed and thousands of Bulgarians flee over the border to Wallachia.

Major military defeats inflicted on the Turks by the Austrian army encourage widespread armed revolt in northern Bulgaria, but the Second Târnovo Uprising – as it became known – is swiftly put down.

A Short History of Byzantium by John Julius Norwich is an absorbing overview of the medieval Byzantine Empire by one of the world's leading experts in the field.

The Crusade of Varna 1443–45 by Colin Imber is a thorough academic investigation into this calamitous period, including eyewitness accounts from each side, available in English translation for the first time.

Through skilful diplomacy, Asen's son, Tsar Ivan Asen II (r 1218–41), became the most powerful ruler in southeastern Europe and established Veliko Tŕrnovo as an influential cultural centre. His most famous military victory was the crushing defeat of the Byzantine army at the Battle of Klokotnitsa in 1230. After the death of Tsar Ivan Asen II, the empire was weakened by Tatar and Arab invasions but in the end, internal fighting among Bulgarian leaders effectively brought an end to the unified Bulgarian state.

UNDER THE YOKE

The Ottoman Turks swarmed into the northern Balkan Peninsula in 1362 and within the next 30 years they had conquered all of Bulgaria, which was subsumed into the Ottoman Empire where it remained for the next five centuries. Turkish rule meant the imposition of a harsh feudal system, and the isolation of Bulgaria from the rest of Christian Europe. Huge numbers of Bulgarians – some estimates say half the entire population – were either killed or carried off into slavery and many churches and monasteries were destroyed or closed. Numerous uprisings were put down with cruel ferocity, and many Bulgarians emigrated.

Turkish overlords settled in urban areas, forcing Bulgarians to flee into the mountains and rural regions. *Haidouks* (armed rebels) took to the hills and fought the occupiers in any way they could, while others, especially in the Rodopi region, were forced to convert to Islam, receiving exemption from tax and some rights in the law courts in return. These Pomaks, as they became known, were despised by their fellow Bulgarians, and remained a source of bitterness for centuries. Bulgarian national and cultural identity managed to survive in isolated monasteries, such as Rila, which were allowed to remain open, or were never found or controlled by the Turks. Taxes owed to the sultan by the Christian Bulgarians were oppressive, and eldest sons were routinely removed from their families to be trained for the elite janissary corps, which provided a bodyguard for the sultan.

BREAKING FREE

Bulgaria's monasteries had done much to preserve the country's history and traditions during the darkest days of Turkish rule, and nationalist sentiment had never been entirely subdued. However, the era that was to become known as the Bulgarian National Revival was prompted by the work of a monk, Paisii Hilendarski, who wrote the first complete history of the Slav-Bulgarian people in 1762. He travelled across Bulgaria reading the history to illiterate people (the authorities would not allow the publication of a Bulgarian-language book) and ignited a long-suppressed national identity. By the early 19th century, the Bulgarian economy was growing fast. Merchants in towns such as Plovdiv and Koprivshitsa were supplying wool, wine, metals and woodcarvings to the ailing Ottoman Empire and Western Europe, and

a new educated, prosperous, urban middle class was emerging, a process that quickened further after the Crimean War, when the victorious allies persuaded Turkey to open up its empire to foreign trade.

These merchants built grand private homes and public buildings, often in the distinct National Revival style (see p54). They were decorated by woodcarvers from Tryavna and painters from Samokov, who had developed a unique Bulgarian style.

Bulgarian art, music and literature also flourished at this time, and schools with instruction in the Bulgarian language were opened. There were *chitalishta* (reading rooms) in nearly every town and village, which provided the people with a communal forum for cultural and social activities – and for political discussions. Official Turkish recognition of an autonomous Bulgarian Orthodox Church in 1870 was a crucial step towards independence.

REVOLUTION & FREEDOM

Rebel leaders, such as Georgi Rakovski, Hristo Botev and Bulgaria's iconic hero Vasil Levski (see the boxed text, p197), had been preparing a revolution against the Turks for years before the rebellion, known as the 1876 April Uprising, prematurely started at Koprivshitsa.

The Turks brutally suppressed the uprising: an estimated 30,000 Bulgarians were massacred and 58 villages were destroyed. The largest massacre occurred in the town of Batak (see the boxed text, p163).

These atrocities caused outrage in Western Europe and led Russia to declare war on the Ottomans in 1877 after the indecisive Constantinople Conference. Major battles were fought at Pleven and Shipka Pass and about 200,000 Russian soldiers were killed throughout Bulgaria during the year-long Russo-Turkish War. As the Russian army, and its Bulgarian volunteers, crushed the Turks and advanced to within 50km of Istanbul, the Ottomans accepted defeat. It ceded 60% of the Balkan Peninsula to Bulgaria in the Treaty of San Stefano, signed on 3 March 1878.

However, fearing the creation of a powerful Russian ally in the Balkans, the powers of Western Europe reversed these gains at the Treaty of Berlin, signed 13 July 1878. They decided that the area between the Stara Planina ranges and the Danube, plus Sofia, would become the independent principality of Bulgaria. The Thracian Plain and Rodopi Mountains to the south would become Eastern Rumelia and, bizarrely, were placed under Ottoman stewardship. The Aegean Thracian plain and Macedonia were returned outright to Turkey. The legacy of the Treaty of Berlin carved up the region irrespective of ethnicity and left every Balkan nation feeling cheated and angry. These redefined borders have haunted the peninsula ever since: between 1878 and WWII the Balkan countries, including Bulgaria, fought six wars over border issues.

Travels in European Turkey in 1850 by Edmund Spencer is a first-hand travelogue giving a rare insight into the later years of Ottoman rule in the Balkans.

The Balkans 1804–1999: Nationalism, War and the Great Powers by Misha Glenny explores the historic background to the ethnic strife and conflicts that have beset the region.

1762

The National Revival era begins with the dissemination of Paisii Hilendarski's *Slav-Bulgarian History*, and continues into the 19th century, when Bulgarian-language education (1840s) and the Bulgarian Orthodox Church (1870) are established.

1854–56

The Crimean War brings British and French troops to Bulgaria, and Varna becomes an important garrison town. The Turks are persuaded to open up Bulgaria to international trade.

1876

The April Uprising against Ottoman rule begins in Koprivshitsa; its quick suppression is followed by civilian massacres, causing international outrage. In November, the Turks reject Bulgarian autonomy at the Constantinople Conference.

1877–78

Russo-Turkish War; the Russian army, headed by Tsar Alexander II, invades Bulgaria and inflicts a heavy defeat on the forces of the Ottoman Empire, forcing the Turks to sign the Treaty of San Stefano, ceding 60% of the Balkan Peninsula to Bulgaria.

1878

Only four months after the gains of San Stefano, the Western European powers carve Bulgaria up at the Treaty of Berlin, fearing a 'Big Bulgaria' will be too powerful a Russian ally.

1885

Bulgaria is reunited with its Ottoman-controlled lands in a bloodless coup. The Turks prepare for war and Serbia invades Bulgaria, but is soon defeated. The country's new borders are internationally recognised.

THE MACEDONIAN QUESTION *Christopher Deliso*

For many Bulgarians, there is no question: Macedonians are simply Bulgarians in denial, their country, really a part of the Bulgarian state, unfairly detached by bad luck and Great-Powers intrigues. No wonder Bulgaria's self-proclaimed Macedonian minority is now having such a tough time gaining acceptance.

Since the medieval Bulgarian Empire included much of today's Republic of Macedonia (as well as modern Greece's Macedonian province), 19th-century Bulgarian nationalism preached that Macedonia should be retaken, once the Turks were overthrown. After the 1877–78 Russo-Turkish War, Bulgaria was awarded much of both Macedonia and Thrace by the Treaty of San Stefano. However, the Great Powers, fearing Russia's Balkan expansion, forced a new peace conference. The resulting Treaty of Berlin drastically reduced San Stefano's proposed borders, causing great resentment and feeding decades of strife.

In August 1903, unending Turkish atrocities against Macedonia's Christian populations provoked the Ilinden Uprising, which created the Balkans' first republic, in the Macedonian mountain town of Krushevo. Although the Turks soon crushed the rebellion, both Macedonians and Bulgarians consider it essential to their national heritage.

While both governments agreed to joint celebrations of Ilinden Day (2 August), Bulgaria has taken a hardline attitude towards its Macedonian minority, propelled by inflammatory media reports and ultranationalists' rhetoric. Indeed, despite being the first country to recognise the independent Macedonian state after it peacefully separated from Yugoslavia in 1991, Bulgaria doesn't recognise the Macedonian identity, language or church.

For many Macedonians and Bulgarians, the Pirin Mountain region is considered part of the geographical Macedonia, the subregion 'Pirin Macedonia'. However, this doesn't mean (as Bulgarian journalists and politicians darkly intone) a threat of annexation by the Macedonian state. 'We just want to live in peace, in a truly multiethnic and democratic country', says 34-year-old Stojko Stojkov, a co-president of OMO-Ilinden, a group representing Bulgaria's Macedonian minority.

OMO-Ilinden has repeatedly tried and failed to become a political party. Bulgarian law requires candidate groups to provide a list of at least 5000 members – including their addresses and telephone and ID numbers. This information proved useful in December 2006 when the Bulgarian government ordered all 6000 members of OMO-Ilinden to be rounded up for police interrogation. While this Stalinesque decision conjured up dark images of Bulgaria's communist and nationalist past, it was ignored by the European Union, which welcomed Bulgaria into its club on 1 January 2007. Police later intimidated Macedonians attending the annual commemoration of revolutionary Yane Sandanski at his tomb at Rozhen Monastery. Small provocations still occur.

While the Strasbourg-based European Court of Human Rights has ruled in OMO-Ilinden's favour, and the Council of Europe has also condemned the Bulgarian government's heavy-handed approach, in Bulgaria itself, says Stojkov, 'only the Bulgarian Helsinki Human Rights Committee supports us'.

At the time of writing, the Bulgarian Supreme Court had just denied OMO-Ilinden's appeal of a lower court's ruling against it. Nevertheless, Stojkov's confident things will eventually improve. 'Bulgaria is in the European Union now – they have to allow us to represent ourselves. The only question is how and when.'

The Nascent State

On 16 April 1879 the first Bulgarian national assembly was convened at Veliko Târnovo in order to adopt a constitution, and on 26 June of that year Alexander Battenberg, a German prince, was elected head of state. On 6 September 1885 the principality of Bulgaria and Eastern Rumelia were reunified after a bloodless coup. This contravention of the Treaty of Berlin angered the central European powers and Turkish troops advanced to the southern border of the reunified Bulgaria.

Serbia, supported by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, suddenly declared war on Bulgaria. Heroic Bulgarian border guards defied the odds and repelled advancing Serbian troops while the Bulgarian army hurriedly moved from the Turkish border to the western front. Eventually, the Bulgarians defeated the Serbs and advanced deep within Serbian territory. Austria intervened, calling for a ceasefire, and the Great Powers recognised the reunified Bulgaria.

THE WAR YEARS

Alexander was forced to abdicate in 1886 and was replaced by Prince (later King) Ferdinand of the Saxe-Coburg-Gotha family. Around this time the prime minister, Stefan Stambolov, accelerated the country's economic development and two Bulgarian political parties were founded that would wield enormous influence in the years ahead. These were the Social Democrats, forerunner to the communists, and the Agrarian Union, which represented the peasantry.

King Ferdinand I declared Bulgaria's complete independence from Ottoman control on 22 September 1908. But only four years later, the First Balkan War broke out when Bulgaria, Greece and Serbia declared war on Turkey. Although these states succeeded in largely pushing the Turks out of the Balkans, squabbling among the victors, especially over claims to Macedonia, led to the Second Balkan War (1913), from which Bulgaria emerged a loser.

Bulgaria entered WWI on the side of the Central Powers (which ironically included Turkey) in 1915. Facing widespread opposition to his pro-German policies, Ferdinand abdicated three years later in favour of his son, Boris III.

Between Wars

In the 1919 Treaty of Neuilly, Bulgaria lost Aegean Thrace to Greece, the southern Dobrudzha to Romania, and was saddled with humiliating and crippling war reparations. The interwar period was marked by political and social unrest, and the ruling Agrarian Party's radical agenda and willingness to renounce territorial claims to Macedonia resulted in a right-wing military coup in 1923, while in 1925 communist terrorists tried, unsuccessfully, to kill Boris III at Sofia's Sveta Nedelya Cathedral, murdering 123 people in the process. The 1930s saw the rise of the right-wing Zveno group, which staged a coup d'état in 1934, and after 1935, Tsar Boris assumed dictatorial powers.

DID YOU KNOW?

The Russian Tsar, Alexander II, known to Bulgarians as Tsar Osvo-boditel (Tsar Liberator) for freeing Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire, abolished serfdom in his empire in 1861. He was assassinated in 1881.

Crown of Thorns: The Reign of King Boris III of Bulgaria by Stephane Groueff tells the intriguing story of Bulgaria's war-time monarch.

DID YOU KNOW?

Communist leader Georgi Dimitroff first found fame when he was accused, along with three others, of starting the infamous Reichstag fire in Berlin in 1933. Stalin later secured a deal for his release.

1908

Prince Ferdinand takes advantage of political chaos in Turkey to declare full independence from Ottoman suzerainty. Bulgaria upgrades its status from a principality to a kingdom, and Ferdinand is crowned tsar.

1912–13

Bulgaria and its neighbours fight Turkey in the First Balkan War (1912), reclaiming more territory from the Ottoman Empire. The allies fall out over the spoils and Bulgaria is defeated by Greece and Serbia in the Second Balkan War (1913).

1919

The Treaty of Neuilly punishes Bulgaria for its German alliance in WWI, granting huge swaths of land to its neighbours and saddling the government with crippling and humiliating reparation payments.

1923

Prime Minister Aleksander Stambolyiski is assassinated in a bloody coup by right-wing military supporters of Macedonian revolutionaries. A communist uprising that year is brutally repressed and the communist party is banned.

1940

The Southern Dobrudzha region, occupied by Romania since the end of the Balkan Wars, is finally returned to Bulgaria for a nominal fee and Bulgarian troops make a triumphant entry into Balchik and other towns.

1941

After declaring neutrality at the start of WWII, Bulgaria is persuaded to join the Axis powers after German troops are stationed along the Danube, and declares war on Britain and France, but not on the Soviet Union.

Beyond Hitler's Grasp: The Heroic Rescue of Bulgaria's Jews by Michael Bar-Zohar is a thought-provoking account of the heroism of ordinary Bulgarians in protecting their Jewish neighbours from the Nazis during WWII.

The Diary of Georgi Dimitrov, 1933–1949, edited by Ivo Banac, gives a revealing insight into the mind of Bulgaria's first communist ruler and his relationship with Stalin.

Voices from the Gulag: Life and Death in Communist Bulgaria, edited by Tzvetan Todorov, is a collection of first-hand accounts from inmates, guards and bureaucrats of the horrors of the communist system.

World War II

At the beginning of WWII Bulgaria declared its neutrality. However, by 1941 German troops advancing towards Greece were stationed along the Danube on Bulgaria's northern border with Romania. To avoid a war it could not win, and tempted by Hitler's offer of Macedonia in return for assistance, the militarily weak Bulgarian government decided to join the Axis. Bulgaria allowed the Nazis into the country and officially declared war on Britain and France, but it refused to accede to demands that it declare war on Russia. Spurred by public opinion, the Bulgarian government also held back from handing over the country's 50,000 Jews to the Third Reich. Tsar Boris III died suddenly on 28 August 1943, one week after meeting Hitler, prompting the inevitable conspiracy theories about murder, through slow-acting poison, though current research has found no evidence of this. Boris' infant son succeeded him as Tsar Simeon II.

During the winter of 1943–44, Allied air raids inflicted heavy damage on Sofia and other major towns in central Bulgaria. A hastily formed coalition government sought a separate peace with the Allies, but to no avail. Then Russia declared war and invaded Bulgaria. On 9 September 1944 the Fatherland Front, a resistance group coalition that included communists, assumed power. Even before WWII had ended, 'people's courts' were set up around the country at which thousands of members of the wartime 'monarch-fascist' government were sent to prison or executed.

RED BULGARIA

The Fatherland Front won the November 1945 elections and the communists gained control of the new national assembly. Under leader Georgi Dimitrov, a new constitution, created on the Soviet model, proclaimed the People's Republic of Bulgaria on 15 September 1946. The royal family was forced into exile.

From the late 1940s, industrialisation and the collectivisation of agriculture was imposed, and opponents, 'class traitors' or any other awkward individuals were harshly dealt with by the strict Stalinist regime, often through the ever-popular show trials. Dimitrov's successor, Váiko Chervenkov was known as 'Little Stalin' for his unquestioning loyalty. Under Todor Zhivkov, Bulgaria's leader from 1954 to 1989, the country prospered under Soviet protection, which included cheap oil, electricity and other necessities. However, this boon came at a price, and the Bulgarian secret police had an especially fearsome reputation for their handling of dissidents, at home or abroad, and were even rumoured to have been plotting the assassination of Pope John Paul II. A ruthless nationalism came to the fore in the 1980s, when Turks, Pomaks and Roma were pressured into adopting Bulgarian names. Riots and a mass exodus of ethnic Turks resulted.

THE RETURN OF DEMOCRACY

By 1989 *perestroika* was sending shock waves throughout Eastern Europe. On 10 November 1989 an internal Communist Party coup led to the resignation of the ageing Zhivkov, and the Communist Party agreed to relinquish its monopoly on power, changing its name to the Bulgarian Socialist Party (BSP). In opposition, a coalition of 16 different groups formed the Union of Democratic Forces (UDF). However, the BSP comfortably won the first parliamentary elections in June 1990, so Bulgaria had the dubious honour of being the first country from the former Soviet Bloc to elect communists back into power.

However, the BSP soon lost favour with the electorate, and the UDF managed a narrow victory in the October 1991 parliamentary elections. Within a year, though, their government had collapsed. After a caretaker government of technocrats was similarly unable to deal with the financial disarray, the BSP again captured, in overwhelming fashion, the December 1994 parliamentary elections. Meanwhile, Zhelyu Zhelev of the UDF became the new Bulgarian head of state after the first democratic presidential elections in January 1992.

The mid-1990s was a period of economic chaos, marked by hyperinflation and a sharp drop in living standards, which included the return of bread lines and fuel shortages, while legitimised criminal networks flaunted their new-found wealth.

The election of liberal lawyer Petâr Stoyanov of the UDF as president in November 1996, coupled with the resignation of the unpopular socialist prime minister Zhan Videnov, signalled that the electorate was finally fed up. Nationwide protests and highway blockades eventually forced the discredited BSP to agree to new parliamentary elections.

April 1997 ushered in the seventh change of government in as many years. Ivan Kostov of the United Democratic Forces (UDF), a coalition that included the other UDF, became prime minister and promised to combat corruption and attract foreign investment while adhering to market reforms. But like leaders of all former communist countries, Kostov had to make harsh economic decisions, which pleased the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and EU, but not the voters.

Into the 21st Century

In June 2001 the Bulgarian electorate made history by voting in their former king as prime minister – the first ex-monarch to return to power in Eastern Europe. Simeon Saxe-Coburg, or Simeon II as he is still often known, had formed his party, the National Movement Simeon II (NMSII), only two months before the election. Saxe-Coburg had lived most of his life in Spain and although he did not actually run for a parliamentary seat, the rules still allowed him to become prime minister.

DID YOU KNOW?

The body of communist leader Georgi Dimitrov, who died in 1949, lay embalmed in Sofia until 1990. His mausoleum was dynamited in 1999.

DID YOU KNOW?

Former king, prime minister and NMSII party leader Simeon Saxe-Coburg is a distant relative of Queen Elizabeth II.

1945–46

After scoring victories in the 1945 elections, the communists gain power under their leader Georgi Dimitrov. In 1946 the People's Republic of Bulgaria is proclaimed with backing from the Soviet Union.

1957

The first hotel opens in the planned package beach resort of Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi), marking the start of mass tourism in Bulgaria. In the 1960s, it becomes a popular holiday destination for tourists from across the Eastern Bloc.

1958

The communist government initiates a mass collectivisation of agriculture in a programme known as 'The Great Leap Forward', intending to fulfil its five-year plan for modernisation in just three years.

1978

In a murky scenario that could have been written by Ian Fleming, Bulgarian dissident Georgi Markov is assassinated in London with a poisoned umbrella tip by an agent of the Bulgarian secret service.

1981

Bulgaria celebrates the 1300th anniversary of the founding of the Bulgarian state, spending lavish amounts of money on nationwide celebrations and the building of public monuments.

1984

A nationalistic campaign begins, aimed at forcing the country's ethnic Turkish population to adopt Bulgarian names and assimilate into mainstream Bulgarian society. A mass exodus of Turks ensues.

The party won exactly half the seats in parliament and entered into a coalition with the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms (MRF), the party with the smallest number of elected representatives. The new government raised the minimum wage from 85 lv to 100 lv per month and promised a turnaround in Bulgaria's economic fortunes, pushing for both NATO and EU membership.

However, in a major upset just five months after the new government took office, Petăr Stoyanov, regarded as one of Bulgaria's most popular politicians, was beaten by the Socialist Party leader Georgi Parvanov in the presidential elections. Anyone looking for consistency in Bulgarian politics will be sorely disappointed.

BULGARIA TODAY

Low wages, unemployment and the growth of organised crime, among other things, led to disillusionment with the NMSII, and at the general election of 2005 the BSP was returned as the biggest party. After weeks of stalemate, it finally formed a coalition government with the NMSII and the Turkish MRF party, with the BSP's Sergei Stanishev as prime minister. Turnout for the vote was low, and there was much criticism of the government's decision to offer competition prizes, including cars, as an incentive for people who did turn up at the polling booths. In 2006, Georgi Parvanov won another five-year term as president, in a landslide against a nationalist candidate who opposed EU entry.

Bulgaria's entry into NATO in 2004, along with a number of other former Warsaw Pact countries, was welcomed by a Bulgarian population keen to engage with the wider world, and in January 2007 the country, along with neighbouring Romania, finally joined the EU, introducing a third alphabet (Cyrillic) into the multilingual organisation. Already, though, there have been problems, with EU criticism, and threats of fines, over Bulgaria's tardiness in supplying a list of areas to be included in the pan-European Natura 2000 network of protected ecological areas (see p72) and the state of waste management in Sofia; the EU will now supply 80% of the money needed for a new waste recycling plant. The government, meanwhile, scored a small victory after winning the right to call the European common currency the 'Evro' rather than the 'Euro' in Bulgaria, in keeping with local pronunciation.

Discontent over low wages has increased since Bulgaria joined the EU, and 2007 saw a succession of long, drawn-out strikes. Teachers, demanding as much as a 100% wage increase, took industrial action over the summer, and all the teachers in five major cities, including Varna and Burgas, resigned en masse in protest at wages that are among the lowest in Europe. Bulgaria's current minimum wage is just 220 lv (€110) per month.

Corruption continues to be a hot topic, especially around the vast construction projects shooting up in the big tourist resorts. There have been

numerous campaigns spearheaded by environmentalists against what they see as thoughtless overdevelopment of pristine and supposedly protected areas of the country, all in the name of big business and big money. Organised crime, meanwhile, prompts sighs of exasperation from people who have lost trust in their government to combat it. Bulgaria has become a hub for human trafficking and the drug trade into Europe.

Painful memories of the country's totalitarian past were once again dragged up in the run-up to local elections in 2007, with numerous politicians, including the current president, 'outed' as state security collaborators under the communist regime. What effect all this will have on the government's future, though, is uncertain, but there is a great deal of disenchantment with politicians in general. Far-right nationalism entered the mainstream political arena at the 2005 elections, with 12 members of the ultranationalist Ataka party entering parliament, and wherever they go, controversy is sure to follow.

One of the biggest talking points of recent years was resolved in 2007, when the five Bulgarian nurses imprisoned in Libya since 1999, on charges that they deliberately infected children in their care with HIV, were finally released. The nurses had been sentenced to death, but direct intervention by the EU and France brought the affair to wider world attention.

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HISTORY •• Bulgaria Today 45

See www.parliament.bg for more information, in English, on the workings, personnel and policies of the Bulgarian Parliament. More still can be found at www.government.bg.

Imagining The Balkans by Maria Todorova is an insightful read challenging what the author sees as the historically entrenched, negative images of this 'troubled' corner of Europe.

1989–90

Democratic changes sweeping through Eastern Europe reach Bulgaria: Todor Zhivkov's communist regime collapses, but the first free parliamentary elections are won by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, the new name for the old communist party.

1990

After the collapse of the communist regime, elections are held in Bulgaria for the first time and the socialist candidate, Zhelyu Zhelev becomes the country's first democratically elected president.

1996–97

Massive inflation, widespread corruption and plummeting wages cause an economic crisis, making Bulgaria the poorest country in Europe. The socialist government collapses; elections bring a democratic coalition to power.

2001

Bulgaria's former king, the charismatic Simeon Saxe-Coburg, exiled by the communists as a child, is elected prime minister just months after founding a new political party, the National Movement Simeon II.

2004

Bulgaria finally puts its communist past behind it and, along with several other former Warsaw Pact nations, joins NATO. Bulgarian troops are posted overseas in peace-keeping roles.

2007

On 1 January, Bulgaria joins the EU, introducing the Cyrillic alphabet to the polyglot organisation. The Bulgarian government comes under increasing pressure to deal more firmly with organised crime and environmental problems.

The Culture

THE NATIONAL PSYCHE

Living on the edge of Europe, Bulgarians have a fierce pride in their own often tempestuous history and their centuries of struggle against foreign occupation. As the country continues to integrate into the wider world and welcome more foreign tourists, though, many have come to question what exactly it means to be Bulgarian, and are frustrated at the country's lack of a tangible international image. EU membership has provided a confidence boost as people begin to feel more a part of the European mainstream; at the same time they are looking ever more keenly at their own identity. The recent spate of Thracian archaeological discoveries has encouraged interest in this period, which lost out to the study of Slav history during the communist era, and many want Bulgaria's Thracian heritage to be the nation's international trademark.

Regrettably, Bulgaria and its people remain something of an enigma to most Westerners, but increasing tourism is slowly putting this to rights. Warm and open to strangers, Bulgarians are a welcoming and hospitable people, with an often worldly wise, cynical outlook on life: decades of totalitarian rule and corruption and uneven economic fortunes since have taught them not to expect much of politicians and bureaucrats. Family and friends are of paramount importance and regional loyalties – and rivalries – are often strong, too, although that doesn't diminish their national sensibilities, especially when an international football match is in the offing.

DAILY LIFE

As elsewhere in Eastern Europe, Bulgaria is still largely a conservative and traditional society, and rural life goes on much as it has done for the last century or so, although even the remotest areas are beginning to see the effects of foreign investment as ramshackle old houses are snapped up by developers for holiday homes and construction projects shoot up in and around the more popular areas. Many welcome the extra income brought into these once poor areas, though others lament the social dislocation and environmental damage of overdevelopment.

Things are of course very different in the cities, where Western boutiques, tacky casinos and strip clubs have proliferated, and racks of porn magazines openly decorate every newsstand alongside children's comics and daily newspapers. The gay scene, on the other hand, is still very discreet and mostly confined to Sofia.

All Bulgarians, though, are very proud of their education: the literacy rate in Bulgaria is over 98%, one of the highest in the world. Family life, too, is important: private events such as christenings, weddings, house-warmings and birthdays are celebrated with gusto, as are public festivals and holidays. The severe decline in the birth rate over recent years has resulted in many one-child families, poor maternity leave and low pay having dissuaded many people from starting large families. Since Bulgaria joined the EU, people have been far less patient with poor levels of pay and services, especially as the cost of living rises.

ECONOMY

Bulgaria's transition to a free-market economy after the fall of communism was a painful period in the country's history, characterised by hyperinflation and high unemployment. Things stabilised after the lev was pegged to

the Deutschmark in 1997 and subsequently to the Euro in 2002, and the country has experienced an economic upturn since joining the EU in January 2007. Foreign investment and tourism are at all-time highs, fuelling a major construction boom, especially on the Black Sea coast. In fact, the demand has been so great that workers have had to be brought in from as far away as Ukraine to complete building projects.

However, despite the healthy economy and Bulgaria's top-10 ranking in the World Bank's list of best reforming economies in the world, serious problems remain. Bulgaria is the poorest country in the EU, and average wages hover around €200 a month, among the lowest on the continent. In 2007 there were a succession of strikes by nurses, medical staff, miners, public transport drivers and teachers demanding wage increases of up to 100%. With record consumer price inflation reaching 12%, this is unlikely to happen, but now that Bulgaria is a fully fledged EU member, people are far less content with low pay.

It has been estimated, too, that the so-called 'grey economy' – undeclared incomes, 'contract-free' workers and fiddled tax returns – makes up as much as 35% of the economy as a whole, prompting calls for tax cuts and a reduction in VAT (Value Added Tax).

POPULATION

Bulgaria is a small nation of just under 7.5 million people, some 70% of whom now live in urban centres, including Sofia, which is the largest city by far, and (in order of population size) Plovdiv, Varna, Burgas, Ruse, Stara Zagora, Pleven and Sliven. Around 14% of Bulgarians call the capital home.

Bulgaria's population is falling at a faster rate than any other nation in Europe due to a decreasing birth rate, a child mortality rate three times the European average and emigration spurred on by high unemployment, low wages and, since 2007, the opening up of labour markets in other EU member states. It has been estimated that around 1.5 million people have left the country since 1989.

Bulgarians are of Slavic origin and constitute roughly 85% of the population. The largest minority groups are the Turks (9%) and the Roma (4.5%), while the remainder belong to tiny ethnic groups such as the Armenians, Wallachs and Circassians, as well as small numbers of Jews and ethnic Greeks and Russians. Greek populations are found in places such as Sozopol and Sandanski. Most of Bulgaria's 757,000 Turks live in the northeast and in the foothills of the eastern Rodopi Mountains, especially, of course, towards the Turkish border.

The Rodopi Mountains area is home to about 200,000 Pomaks, the descendants of Slavs who converted to Islam during the Ottoman occupation in the 15th century. In the past, they have been subjected to the same assimilatory pressures as the Turks. Some villages in the Rodopis, such as Borino, are almost entirely Pomak.

At the outbreak of WWII, about 50,000 Jews lived in Bulgaria. Although forced to assemble in provincial labour camps, none were turned over to the Nazis despite the fact that the Bulgarian government had formed an alliance with Germany. After the war most Jews left for Israel; only about 5000 still remain in Bulgaria, most in Sofia.

MULTICULTURALISM

Although it's been invaded, conquered and occupied by countless foreign powers throughout its long history, Bulgaria remains a fairly homogenous nation, with some 85% of the population declaring themselves Bulgarian.

For a Bulgarian odyssey, read Dani Valent's fascinating account of travelling through her grandparents' home country for the first time. See www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgarianodyssey

The Orient Within by Mary Neuberger investigates the story of Bulgaria's Muslim minority population, their relationship with the modern state and ideas of national identity.

YES OR NO?

Bulgarians shake their head in a curved, almost bouncy, motion to indicate 'yes', and nod their heads to mean 'no' – it's confusing at first, then fun. Just try to think that a shake is sweeping the floor clean ('yes, come in') and a nod is slamming a garage door shut ('no, go away fool!'). To add to the confusion, some Bulgarians may do the opposite to 'help' confused foreigners. If there is any doubt, ask *da ili ne?* (yes or no?).

In 1985 the communists mounted a programme to assimilate the country's Turkish inhabitants by forcing them to accept Bulgarian names. Mosques were also closed down and even wearing Turkish dress and speaking Turkish in public were banned. Mass protests erupted, and in early 1989 about 300,000 Turkish Bulgarians and Pomaks left for Turkey (though many subsequently returned to Bulgaria when the repressive policies were overturned).

Relations between Bulgarians and the ethnic Turkish minority have improved since, and the 2005 election resulted in a coalition government led by the Bulgarian Socialist Party, including the Turkish Movement for Rights and Freedoms party – the third biggest party in parliament. However, racial tensions remain, and the far-right Ataka party, with its aggressively nationalistic rhetoric, hasn't exactly soothed the situation.

Bulgaria's Roma suffer disproportionate rates of unemployment, social deprivation, illiteracy, poverty and prejudice, and public attitudes towards them are rarely sympathetic. They tend to live in ghettos and can be seen begging on the streets all over the country. Along with other East and Central European nations, Bulgaria signed up to the Decade of Roma Inclusion (www.romadecade.org) programme in 2005, which attempts to improve conditions for Roma populations. Some success in providing employment has been claimed, but it remains to be seen if any lasting good comes out of it. In the meantime, the Roma are often subject to abuse. Violent attacks on Roma youths by skinheads in the Roma-dominated Sofia suburb of Krasna Polyana in 2007 led to armed riots, which in turn resulted in the ultra-nationalist Bulgarian People's Union calling for a National Guard of patriotic volunteers to be formed to protect citizens from such menace. It's an ongoing social problem with no easy answers.

One topic that excites massive controversy is the 'Macedonian question'. The historical region of Macedonia covered areas of modern-day northern Greece and southwestern Bulgaria, as well as the Republic of Macedonia itself. In 1945 the inhabitants of the Pirin region were named a Macedonian ethnic minority, and there were plans to merge Bulgaria and Macedonia into one country, though all this came to nothing in the end and by the 1960s the ethnic minority status was rescinded. The majority of people living in the Pirin region regard themselves first and foremost as Bulgarian, but movements for regional autonomy such as the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation (IMRO) still exist (see the boxed text, p40).

MEDIA

Press freedom is a touchy topic in Bulgaria and the country has been criticised by international bodies such as the Paris-based Reporters Without Borders (RSF). In 2007, their annual Press Freedom listings ranked Bulgaria at 51 (down from number 35 in 2006), making the country one of only two EU nations outside the top 50. It has been claimed that reporters are often ob-

structed or even attacked in the course of their duties, and in 2007 a court dropped charges against police officers who had beaten up a press photographer as he tried to take pictures of a well-known gangster.

In 2000, the Rupert Murdoch-owned Balkan News Corporation launched BTV, the country's first private commercial channel, and in 2003, Nova TV became Bulgaria's second commercial TV channel. In addition, there are now several privately run satellite TV channels, such as 7-Dni, and more than 130 radio stations. Bulgaria National TV (BNT) is the state public broadcaster, operating Kanal 1 and the satellite channel TV Bulgaria.

RELIGION

Orthodox Christianity has been the official religion since 865, though modern Bulgaria is a secular state that allows freedom of religion. The vast majority of the population – around 83% – still professes adherence to the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, although only a fraction of this number actually attends church services on a regular basis. Major holy days do draw out the crowds, however, and attending an Orthodox service is an unforgettable experience for visitors. Worshippers light candles and kiss icons as bearded, golden-robed priests sing and swing their incense burners.

Some 12% of the population is Muslim – ethnic Turks, Pomaks and most Roma. Over the centuries the Islam practised in Bulgaria has incorporated various Bulgarian traditions and Christian beliefs and has become known as Balkan Islam.

There's also a small Jewish population – Judaism arrived in Bulgaria with refugees from Catholic Spain in the 15th century, and is still practised at synagogues in Sofia and Vidin.

Other Christian denominations, including Roman Catholics, Protestants and Armenian Orthodox, account for just under 2% of the nation.

WOMEN IN BULGARIA

Bulgarian culture has a strong macho edge to it, and although there have been improvements in the status of women in the workplace over recent years, old-fashioned attitudes are still daily facts of life. Pouting, scantily clad women are popular motifs used for advertising everything from alcohol to shopping centres, while a profusion of sleazy strip clubs and escort agencies has appeared in the big cities, colourfully touted in tourist magazines alongside reviews of restaurants and museums.

Women have made it into the top levels of national politics, business, the media and other competitive areas of employment, but most Bulgarian women are still expected to put raising a family before any other commitments. The country's dramatic population decline and very low birth rate, though, have finally prompted the government to act, and better-paid maternity leave and improved childcare are now offered in an effort to both encourage family life and help women back to work sooner after childbirth.

ARTS

Bulgaria has an ancient tradition of icon painting and these religious images are still the most accessible and memorable of Bulgarian art. Five centuries of Turkish rule suppressed much of native Bulgarian culture, but the National Revival of the late 18th to 19th centuries saw a creative blossoming as writers and artists strove to reignite the national consciousness. During the communist era, however, most Bulgarians with artistic, literary, theatrical or musical talents were trained in the former Soviet Union and therefore heavily influenced by the Russians. These days, artistic activity in Bulgaria is at an all-time high.

DID YOU KNOW?

Dunovism, founded in Bulgaria after WWI by Peter Dunov, is a religion combining Orthodox Christianity with yoga, meditation and belief in reincarnation.

Holidays of the Bulgarians in Myths and Legends by Nikolay Nikov is a fascinating account of the traditions and customs associated with all the major festivals.

CHRISTO & JEANNE-CLAUDE

Undoubtedly the most internationally famous living Bulgarian artist is Christo Javacheff, known simply as Christo. Born in Gabrovo in 1935, he studied at Sofia's Fine Arts Academy in the 1950s and met his French-born wife, Jeanne-Claude, in Paris in 1958. They have worked in collaboration since 1961, when they created their first outdoor temporary installation, *Stacked Oil Barrels*, at Cologne Harbour. Since then, the couple, who moved to New York in 1964, have made a name for themselves with their (usually) temporary, large-scale architectural artworks, often involving wrapping famous buildings in fabric or polypropylene sheeting to highlight their basic forms. In 1985 they created *The Pont Neuf Wrapped*, covering the Parisian landmark in golden fabric for 14 days, while in 1995 the Reichstag in Berlin was covered entirely with silver fabric. More recently, *The Gates* was unveiled in New York's Central Park in 2005, an impressive installation consisting of 7503 vinyl gates spread over 32km of walkways. Christo and Jeanne-Claude are still working on major projects around the world, and current schemes still in the planning stage include *The Mastaba*, a gigantic stack of 390,500 barrels to be built in the desert in the UAE. For the latest news, see www.christojeanneclaude.net.

Painting & Sculpture

Most of Bulgaria's earliest artists painted on the walls of homes, churches and monasteries. The most famous was unquestionably Zahari Zograf (1810–53), who painted magnificent murals that can still be admired in the monasteries at Rila, Troyan and Bachkovo. Many of Zograf's works were inspired by medieval Bulgarian art, though they display a more human (if often gory and sadistic) spirit, with naked sinners being inventively tortured by demons (a common and seemingly much-relished motif) alongside the prettier scenes of angels and saints.

Famous Bulgarian artists of the last 150 years include Vladimir Dimitrov, often referred to as 'The Master', Georgi Mashev, Michail Lutov, Zlatyu Boyadjiev and Ivan Angelov. You can see their work in museums and galleries around the country. Contemporary Bulgarian artists include the renowned sculptor Asen Botev and the abstract painter Kolyo Karamfilov. Without doubt, though, the most widely recognised modern Bulgarian artist is Christo (see the boxed text, above).

Bulgarian sculpture developed in the 19th and 20th centuries, and one of the leading lights of the period was Andrei Nikolov (1878–1959), who was influenced by contemporary French styles. His home in Sofia is now a cultural centre and hotel (p103). He designed the stone lion outside Sofia's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier (p91) and more examples of his naturalistic sculptures are on show in the city's National Art Gallery (p90). The works of his contemporary, Ivan Lazarov (1889–1952), were more nationalistic, inspired by the bravery of soldiers and ordinary Bulgarians in wartime. Contemporary sculptors who have enjoyed great success include Georgi Chapkunov, who created the Sofia Monument (p87), Kroum Damianov and Bozhidar Kozarev.

Literature

The first recognised literary work written in Bulgarian was probably *Slav-Bulgarian History* by Paisii Hilendarski (1722–73), an enormously influential work that led to a national revival of Bulgarian cultural heritage and identity from the mid-18th century on.

Bulgaria's most revered author was Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), who wrote *Under the Yoke*, a stirring novel based on the 1876 April Uprising against the Turks. He is commemorated with two house-museums, in Sopot and

Sofia. Other famous literary figures immortalised in museums throughout Bulgaria include Nikola Vaptsarov (in Bansko), Yordan Yovkov (Dobrich) and Dimcho Debelyanov and Lyuben Karavelov (Koprivshtitsa).

Elias Canetti (1905–94) is probably the best internationally known Bulgarian writer of the 20th century. He was born into a Jewish family in Ruse, though lived most of his life in England, writing in German. His most famous work was *Die Blendung* (Auto-da-Fé), published in 1935. He won the Nobel Prize for Literature in 1981.

Less well known overseas, but still held in high regard, is Bogomil Rainov (1919–2007), who wrote several popular novels, such as *There is Nothing Finer Than Bad Weather*, a Cold War spy story from the other side of the Iron Curtain, made into a film in 1971. Other authors, whose works are available in translation, include the poet Blaga Dimitrova (1922–2003) – also vice president of Bulgaria in 1992–93 – and Georgi Gospodinov (b 1968), whose rambling *Natural Novel* (2005) ranges over topics including toilet graffiti, housing estates and bees.

Music**OPERA & CHORAL**

Bulgaria has an impressive musical tradition, and musical academies continue to produce world-class opera stars such as Boris Hristov, Raina Kabaivanska and Orlin Anastassov.

Emanuil Manolov (1860–1902) wrote the first Bulgarian opera, *Siromahkinita*, based on a work by Ivan Vazov, while Pancho Vladigerov (1899–1978) is acknowledged as Bulgaria's greatest internationally renowned classical composer.

Bulgarian ecclesiastic music dates back to the 9th century and conveys the mysticism of chronicles, fables and legends. To hear Orthodox chants sung by a choir of up to 100 people is a moving experience. Dobri Hristov (1875–1941) was one of Bulgaria's most celebrated composers of church and choral music, and wrote his major choral work, *Liturgy No 1*, for the Seven Saints ensemble, Bulgaria's best-known sacred-music vocal group, based in Sofia's Sveti Sedmochislenitsi Church. The Sofia Boys Choir, formed in 1968, has also performed around the world to great acclaim.

TRADITIONAL

Alongside the scholarly Byzantine traditions maintained in Orthodox church music is the Turkish influence evident in the folk songs and dances of the rural villages. As in many peasant cultures, Bulgarian women are not given access to musical instruments, so they usually perform the vocal parts. They often practise singing while weaving and doing household chores. Bulgarian female singing is polyphonic, featuring many voices and shifting melodies, and women from villages in the Pirin Mountains are renowned for their unique singing style. Some of the more famous performers include Koynya Stoyanova and Yanka Rupkina.

During the communist era, Bulgarian village music was transformed into a sophisticated art form and communicated worldwide by groups such as the Philip Kutev National Folk Ensemble and recordings such as *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares*.

CONTEMPORARY

The most distinctive sound in Bulgarian contemporary music is the spirited, warbling, pop-folk idiom known as *chalga*. Bands usually feature a scantily clad female lead vocalist and play jazzed-up traditional Balkan tunes on instruments such as the electric guitar, clarinet and synthesizer. Some of the

DID YOU KNOW?

The first Bulgarian-language publishing house was founded by Hristo Danov in Plovdiv in 1855. It's now a museum.

Learn more about Seven Saints, Bulgaria's leading sacred-music vocal ensemble, at www.thesevensaints.com

DID YOU KNOW?

Music from *Le Mystère des Voix Bulgares* was included in the capsule aboard the *Voyager 2* space probe in the hope of reaching alien ears.

RECOMMENDED LISTENING

- **Bulgarian Folk Songs and Dances featuring Petko Radev and Petko Dachev** (2000) – a top-selling collection of traditional tunes
- **Twin Kingdoms** (2001) by Georgi Andreev – the music from the colourful stage show (see below)
- **Orthodox Chants** (2004) by Orlin Anastassov and the Seven Saints Choir – sacred sounds from the young opera star and the highly respected church vocal group
- **Diva** (2006) by Azis – pop-folk from Bulgaria's most flamboyant transvestite
- **Best Ballads** (2007) by Emilia – the biggest hits of one of Bulgaria's top *chalga* stars
- **Contact** (2004) by the Balkan Horses Band – innovative prog-rock played with traditional Balkan instruments
- **Bulgarian Impressions** (2000) by Pancho Vladigerov – some of the composer's most popular works

biggest names in contemporary *chalga* include Gloria, Emilia and, especially, Azis (real name Vassil Boyanov), one of Bulgaria's most recognisable and most unlikely stars. A gay, white-bearded, transvestite Roma, his concerts regularly attract thousands of fans. Also popular is the experimental band Ishihia, which incorporates traditional elements into its music, and the progressive-rock combo Balkan Horses Band, an international ensemble whose members come from Bulgaria, Macedonia, Turkey and other countries in the region.

Other Bulgarian artists worth looking out for are Akaga, who play a mix of folk and techno; Grafa, the so-called 'prince of ballads'; and Stoian Iankulov and Elitsa, who represented Bulgaria at the 2007 Eurovision Song Contest.

Theatre

Every city and major town has at least one theatre, many of them built during the communist era, offering Bulgarian and foreign plays, classical music and operas.

Perhaps more accessible to foreign visitors, musical theatre has also taken off in recent years. The most successful theatre group is the National Art Dance Company, which made its debut at the National Palace of Culture (NDK) in Sofia in 2000 with *Twin Kingdoms*, a contemporary take on Bulgaria's folk-cultural heritage by composer Georgi Andreev. It uses traditional Bulgarian instruments and a variety of musical influences, ranging from baroque to Byzantine and even Balinese styles, to tell a lavish fairy tale of abducted maidens, dragons and witches. This show also has the distinction of being the first-ever Bulgarian production staged on Broadway. The company's other shows include the Gypsy legend-inspired *Aramii* and *Are You Ready?*, a more up-to-date show combining rap, hip-hop, Gypsy music and traditional Bulgarian tunes. Shows are staged across Bulgaria and the troupe often performs overseas. Visit www.neshkaart.com for details.

Another show worth seeing if you get the chance is *This is Bulgaria*, a lively musical romp through the nation's history staged by Bulgare (www.bulgare.net).

Note that most theatres close during July and August, while Sofia's National Palace of Culture (p103) offers a year-round programme of international acts.

See www.balkanhorsesband.com for background information and details of upcoming gigs by the popular cross-cultural prog-rock group.

Cinema

Few Bulgarian films, even those that receive international accolades, get seen overseas. However, recent well-received movies include *Stolen Eyes* (2004), about the fraught relationship between a Christian man and his Muslim girlfriend during the troubled 1980s; *Monkeys in Winter* (2006), chronicling the woe-filled lives and loves of three women living at different periods in Bulgaria over the last four decades; and the downbeat but award-winning *Lady Zee* (2005), about the delicate issues of race, poverty and social exclusion in modern Bulgaria. (There aren't a lot of laughs in Bulgarian cinema.) *Investigation* (2006), a joint Bulgarian-Dutch-German murder mystery directed by Igljka Trifonova, won awards for Best Bulgarian Feature Film and Best Balkan Film at the 2007 Sofia International Film Festival (www.cinema.bg/sff).

Esteemed Bulgarian directors include Peter Popzlatev, Ivanka Grabcheva, Mariana Evstatieva and Ivan Nitchev, who directed the joint German-Bulgarian movie *Journey to Jerusalem* (2003), a sensitive drama about two German-Jewish children fleeing persecution who get stranded at Sofia train station.

Foreign films – such as *The Cherry Orchard* (1999), *The Contractor* (2007), and *Return to House on Haunted Hill* (2007) – are sometimes shot in Bulgaria because of the cheap labour, reliable weather and varied backdrops.

Traditional Crafts

Bulgarian carpets, rugs and traditional costumes were first made as early as the 9th century, but were most popular and creative during the Bulgarian National Revival period. Sadly, weaving is a dying art, practised only by a dwindling band of elderly ladies who still work on handmade looms in a few remote villages such as Chiprovtsi, Kotel and Koprivshtitsa.

Carpets and rugs made in the southern Rodopi Mountains are thick, woolen and practical, while in western Bulgaria they're often delicate, colourful and more decorative. The carpet-making industry began in Chiprovtsi around the late 17th century, with patterns based mainly on geometric abstract shapes. The more popular designs featuring birds and flowers, commonly seen in tourist shops today, were developed in the 19th century.

Woodcarving reached its peak during the National Revival period. While weaving was practised mostly by women, woodcarving was almost exclusively a male domain. Men would spend hours designing and creating wooden furniture and traditional flutes and pipes. More experienced carvers produced intricately carved ceilings (which can be seen in homes and museums in Koprivshtitsa, Kotel, Tryavna and Plovdiv) and iconostases and altars in churches and monasteries.

The craft is still practised in Koprivshtitsa, Teteven and Lovech, but the most famous town in Bulgaria for woodcarving is undoubtedly Tryavna (see the boxed text, p184). One of the best places to admire woodcarvers at work is the Etâr Ethnographic Village Museum (p187) near Gabrovo.

Another ancient Bulgarian craft is pottery; the most famous design is the so-called 'Troyanska kapka' pattern, which literally means 'Trojan droplet', after its town of origin and the runny pattern made by the paint. Everything from plates and bowls to jugs and honey pots are made with this design; blue, brown and green are the most common colours. Bulgarians still use this Trojan ware in the home, though fancier pieces are made for the tourist trade. It's sold all across the country and makes a perfect souvenir.

Princes Amongst Men: Journeys with Gypsy Musicians by Garth Cartwright is a sympathetic introduction to the lives and musical traditions of Roma across the Balkans.

For a round-up of Bulgarian movies, actors and other statistics relating to the country's cinema industry, visit www.bgmovies.info.

Fairy Tales by Ran Bossilek (translated by Terry Whalen and Filipina Filipova) is an engaging collection of simple, age-old fables and stories.

Architecture

The most obvious product of the prodigious and creative Bulgarian National Revival era is the unique architectural style of homes seen throughout the country. These were either built side-by-side along narrow cobblestone streets, as in Plovdiv, or surrounded by pretty gardens, as in Arbanasi.

DID YOU KNOW?

During the Ottoman occupation, by law Christian churches had to be built below ground-level to be as unobtrusive as possible. Many 'sunken' churches from that period can be seen today.

The wood-and-stone homes were usually painted brown and white (though some were more colourful), and featured bay windows and tiled roofs. Ceilings were often intricately carved and/or painted with bright murals and rooms would have several small fireplaces and low doors.

Architectural designs and styles of furniture differed from one region to another. The colour, shape and size of the typical home in Melnik contrasts significantly with those found in Arbanasi. Some of the most stunning examples of National Revival-period homes can also be appreciated in traditional villages such as Koprivshitsa, Tryavna and Shiroka Lúka. There are also examples among the old towns of Plovdiv and Veliko Tárnovo, and at the re-created Etár Ethnographic Village Museum (p187) near Gabrovo.

The most prodigious architect of the National Revival era was Nikola Fichev (1800–81), also known as Master Kolyo Fichev. He built bridges, churches and fountains across central Bulgaria, including the bridge at Byala, the bell tower at Preobrazhenski Monastery (p182) and the Holy Trinity Church in Svishtov. A museum is dedicated to him in his birthplace of Dryanovo.

SPORT

Football (soccer) is by far the most popular Bulgarian spectator sport, and the Sofia-based team, Levski, is the current Bulgarian champion. Football games normally take place on weekends and the season lasts from late August to late May, with a winter break in January and February.

The high point for the Bulgarian national side was the 1994 World Cup, in which it finished in a very respectable fourth place. Since then, however, the team's performance has been disappointing, and it failed to qualify for the 2002 and 2006 World Cups.

The men's national volleyball team has had rather more success recently, winning the bronze at the 2006 World Championships in Japan and being currently ranked fourth in the world league.

Bulgarian tennis came to the fore through the 1990s with the remarkable Maleeva sisters, Magdalena, Katerina and Manuela, who all became WTA Top 10 players, with Manuela reaching the world number-three spot. They have all now retired and today run the Maleeva Tennis Club (p94) in Sofia.

Other sports in which the country has had some international success include basketball, Greco-Roman wrestling and weightlifting.

For all you want to know about the national sport, see www.bulgarian-football.com

Food & Drink

Fresh fruit, vegetables and dairy produce form the basis of Bulgarian cuisine, and besides home-grown Balkan traditions, it has been heavily influenced by Greek and Turkish cookery. When it comes to meat, pork is king, while veal, chicken and tripe are also popular. Duck, rabbit and venison feature in many traditional recipes and fish is plentiful along the Black Sea coast, but less common elsewhere.

STAPLES & SPECIALITIES

Breakfast is rarely more than a coffee and a cigarette for most Bulgarians, but those with more time may partake of cheese, salami and even cakes. Lunch again is normally a small, casual meal, while dinner is the main meal of the day, often of two or three courses, including grilled meat, salad and soup.

Popular Bulgarian dishes with a Turkish influence include the omnipresent *kebabche* (grilled spicy meat sausages) and *kyufte* (basically the same thing, but round and flat). Salads are an essential part of most Bulgarian meals, normally eaten as a starter, but some are so large that they could be a full meal in themselves. *Shopska* salad, which is made with chopped tomatoes, cucumbers, green peppers and onions, covered with feta cheese, is so popular, it's regarded as a national dish, while *snezhanka* ('Snow White') salad is made with cucumbers and plain yoghurt, with garlic, dill and crushed walnuts. *Tarator* (chilled cucumber and yoghurt soup) is a delicious and refreshing summertime dish (see the boxed text, p56). Bread is a staple of Bulgarian meals and it will be brought to you, almost always at a small extra cost, whether you ask for it or not, when you order a main meal.

Offal, in various forms, is a distressingly common feature of many a restaurant menu.

Some tasty regional specialities are *patatnik* (a hearty cheese and potato omelette; Rodopi region), *kapama* (meat, rice and sauerkraut simmered and served in a clay pot; around Bansko), *mlechnik* (similar to crème caramel; Rodopi region) and *midi tzigane* (mussels sautéed with a spicy cheese-and-mustard sauce; along the Black Sea coast).

Popular desserts of Turkish origin include baklava, made with honey and pistachios, and *lokum* (Turkish delight). *Mlechna banitsa* is a sweet pastry made with milk and eggs, and is one of the best Bulgarian desserts, while ice cream features on menus everywhere.

DID YOU KNOW?

The bacteria used to make yoghurt is called *Lactobacillus bulgaricus*, named in honour of its Bulgarian origins.

TASTY TRAVEL

Grilled meat and cheese feature on virtually every Bulgarian restaurant menu, and are sometimes combined, as in the *kyufte tatarsko* (seasoned pork burger filled with melted cheese). Considering that there are only two traditional kinds of Bulgarian cheese, *sirene* ('white', similar to feta) and *kashkaval* ('yellow', hard cheese), it's amazing how much Bulgarians make out of these traditional ingredients. *Pärzheni kartofi säs sirene* (white cheese-topped fried potatoes) is a regular side dish in many cafés and restaurants.

We dare you...

Bulgarians are very keen on using up the parts of animals most Western abattoirs would throw away, but if you have the stomach for it, you might like to try, well, stomach soup (*shkembe chorba*) for a start, or maybe some brain (*mozâk*) or tongue (*ezik*), which come in various forms, including in omelettes. Spleens and intestines also turn up in soups and grills.

COOL AS A CUCUMBER

There is perhaps no more typical or evocative Bulgarian dish than *tarator*, the chilled soup made with diced cucumbers, diluted yoghurt, garlic, dill, salt, vegetable oil and crushed walnuts. Served everywhere as a starter during the hot summer months, it was originally created as a simple yet refreshing meal that could be made in large quantities and kept longer than cooked food. Its preparation is a matter of pride, and slight variations exist around the country; some chefs do away with the walnuts, for example, and others substitute olive oil for the vegetable oil, but if the cucumbers have been grated, or, unforgivably, replaced with lettuce or some other ingredient, then it's simply not the real thing. Oh, and please, never ask for hot *tarator*!

DRINKS

Bulgarians are caffeine addicts, and slurp their way through little cups of coffee morning, noon and night at kiosks, cafés and bars across the country. While you might encounter some instant coffee, good espresso coffee is available everywhere and *Spetema* is a reliable local brand. Smarter places also offer cappuccinos, though in cheaper outlets this might simply be instant coffee with a dollop of sprayed cream on top. If you're looking for a caffè latte and a squashy sofa, international chains can now be found in Sofia and other big cities.

Tea is mostly of the *bilkov* (herbal) and *plodov* (fruit) variety. If you want the real, black tea, ask for *cheren chai*. This will normally come with a slice of lemon; if you'd prefer milk, ask for *chai s'mlyako*.

For a cooling, refreshing beverage at any time of year, *ayran* is hard to beat. It's a chilled, slightly salty, thin yoghurt drink that makes an ideal accompaniment to light meals. Another local speciality, though perhaps more of an acquired taste, is *boza*, a thick malty drink made with millet.

Beer (*pivo* or *bira*) is another staple beverage in Bulgaria, and is sold everywhere, either in bottles or in draught (*nalivna*) form, which is generally cheaper. Leading nationwide brands are Zagorka, Kamenitsa, Ariana and Shumensko, while there are several regional brews, such as Burgasko (from Burgas) and Pirinsko (from Blagoevgrad), which are rarely available far beyond their home areas.

Bulgaria produces huge quantities of both white and red vino (wine), which varies greatly in quality. For more information see p63.

The national spirit is *rakia* (a clear and potent kind of brandy, usually made from grapes, although versions made from plums or apricots can also be found). Slivenska Perla, Manastirska, Burgas-63 and Simeon I are just a few of the many brands available. It's drunk as an aperitif, and served with ice in restaurants and bars, which often devote a whole page on their menus to a list of the regional *rakias* on offer.

Whisky, gin and vodka made in Bulgaria are a lot cheaper than the imported brand names, but in general are probably best left to the Bulgarians. Better quality Bulgarian vodkas include Flirt and Mary Jane.

CELEBRATIONS

Festivals throughout Bulgaria invariably involve eating and drinking, and there are often particular meals prepared for each holiday. One age-old custom is the baking of special loaves of bread, for example for saints' days, each marked with a distinctive design and used in some elaborate ritual; you'll see these displayed in ethnographic museums. On 28 February (Horse Easter), for example, women in rural communities traditionally bake bread in the shape of horseshoes, which are then fed to horses and new brides to ensure fertility. St George's Day (6 May), also known as Gergyovden, originated as

an ancient pagan festival to do with sheep farming, and is one of the most important rural festivals, especially in eastern Bulgaria, involving a big, ritual meal of lamb and bread.

At Easter (called Velikden, or Pasha) a traditional bread is baked, containing whole eggs that have been dyed red. The bread is broken – never sliced – by the eldest member of the family, and pieces are distributed to all family members present. Other celebrations throughout the year are also marked with bread in many forms, including snakes (Jeremiah or Snake Day, 1 May) and crosses (Krastovden or Holy Cross Day, 14 September), or decorated with patterns such as beehives (Prokopi Pchelar or Procopius the Beekeeper Day, 8 July) and bunches of grapes (Preobrazhenie or Transfiguration Day, 6 August). In age-old tradition, Preobrazhenie was the first day on which Bulgarians ate the new crop of grapes, while eating blackberries (once known as devil's grapes) on this day was regarded as taboo.

One rather cheerful time to be anywhere near a winery is 1 February, when the Trifon Zarezan festival takes place to honour the patron saint of vineyards, St Trifon. On this day, wine producers start pruning their vines, and pour wine on the vine roots in the hope of a bountiful harvest. The grower who has produced the largest quantity of wine is declared 'king' and is driven around in an open cart. Plenty of tasting and drinking is also undertaken (all in the name of tradition, of course).

WHERE TO EAT & DRINK

Most outlets providing seating describe themselves as restaurants, while a *mehana* (tavern) is a more traditional restaurant, often decorated in a rustic style, and offering only authentic Bulgarian cuisine. Some of these, of course, are tourist traps, luring foreign tourists with noisy 'folk shows' and waiters in fancy dress, though the real places provide a pleasant atmosphere to linger over good local food. Look out for those frequented by locals and steer clear of any that employ touts to harangue passers-by.

Cafés are cheaper affairs and include basic cafeterias serving precooked Bulgarian food, soups and salads, although more often they will only serve beverages and simple snacks. In the cities, small basic cafés or snack bars offer drinks and snacks, sometimes with a few chairs outside, or just a table to lean on. These are popular with office workers and teenagers grabbing a quick coffee and a sandwich. Look out for signs reading *zakuska* (breakfast).

In the big cities, most restaurants will offer menus in English and, occasionally, French or German, while restaurants in coastal resorts such as Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) and Albena will have multilingual menus featuring Swedish, Finnish and several other languages spoken by international tourists. Restaurant bills will usually be 'rounded up', and a service charge of 10% is sometimes added. If it isn't, a small tip is expected.

Most restaurants are open daily from about 11am to 11pm, although outside the big towns some may close on one or two days of the week. Cafés and street kiosks usually have longer opening hours, roughly 9am to 11pm in cities, although many open earlier to offer a quick breakfast to people hurrying to work.

Quick Eats

Bulgarians are great snackers and in big towns you will see old ladies on the streets or in parks selling *semki* (sunflower seeds) wrapped in paper cones, or homemade bread rolls from sacks. Both go for around 0.50 lv. In the colder months, steamed corn-on-the-cob is proffered by street vendors, while *banitsa* (cheese pastry), *byurek* (essentially the same, but with egg added), *palachinki*

The Bulgarian National Cuisine In My Home by Sonia Kapsazova is a handy, widely available book with easy-to-follow recipes.

(pancakes) and other sweet and savoury pastry products are always popular, and are widely available, most reliably at stalls outside bus and train stations. Prices are normally around 1 lv to 2 lv.

Western fast-food outlets can be found all over Bulgaria, and there are plenty of take-away places selling pizzas, Turkish-style doner kebabs and the like. Trops Káshta and BMS are two nationwide cafeteria chains serving cheap, traditional nosh such as *kebabche* and moussaka.

VEGETARIANS & VEGANS

Vegetarianism remains an alien concept to most Bulgarians, but it's relatively easy to follow a meat-free diet here. On the down side, variety may be lacking, and those with an aversion to cheese may find their options very limited. Most restaurants offer a dozen or more salads, which are sometimes large enough for a main course. Omelettes, vegetarian pizzas and pasta dishes are common, but note that 'vegetarian' meals may simply mean that they include vegetables (as well as meat) or fish. Sometimes this designation doesn't seem to mean anything at all. Vegans will have a much harder time: Kibea Health Food Restaurant in Sofia (p101) is probably the only place in Bulgaria serving genuine vegan dishes.

Other tasty vegetarian meals and snacks include *sirene po shopski* (cheese, eggs and tomatoes baked in a clay pot), *gyuvech* (potatoes, tomatoes, aubergine, onions and carrots baked in a clay pot), *mish-mash* (scrambled eggs with peppers, tomatoes and cheese), *kashkaval pane* (fried breaded cheese), *chuska byurek* (fried, breaded peppers stuffed with egg, cheese and parsley), *bob chorba* (bean soup) and the ever-popular *banitsa*.

EATING WITH KIDS

Most restaurants in Bulgaria welcome families with young children, although few offer specific children's menus and fewer still will have such things as highchairs for babies. The more modern, Western-style restaurants such as the Happy Bar & Grill chain serve up dependable and recognisable food of the sausage-and-chips variety, while pizzas, in various sizes, are available almost everywhere. Similarly, you'll have no problem finding sweets, chocolates, crisps and other treats, while chocolate and jam-filled croissants are a popular local snack. Larger supermarkets will normally have a good supply of baby food and formula. See p284 for further information on travelling with children.

HABITS & CUSTOMS

Dining out in Bulgaria is normally a casual and convivial experience, and the usual Western table manners prevail. Few Bulgarian restaurants, however, have smoke-free zones, and nonsmokers will have to put up with their fellow diners puffing away before, after and even during their meals: if you can, it's best to sit outside.

Breakfast, if eaten at all, is almost invariably eaten at home. Lunch is a light meal, while dinner is often the time for family get-togethers, and is a longer, more sociable affair. Bulgarians tend to eat dinner quite late, and restaurants fill up after about 9pm; you'll have trouble getting a seat at popular places after this time. For a quiet meal, aim to eat dinner around 6.30pm to 7pm.

EAT YOUR WORDS

If you want to know the difference between *kebabche* and *kyufte*, or are looking for a meal without meat, you'll first need to learn the Cyrillic alphabet. For language guidelines, see p309.

If you're looking for a quick and easy Bulgarian recipe, www.findbgfood.com gives instructions for several popular dishes.

Traditional Bulgarian Cooking by Atanas Slavov gives more than 140 recipes you might like to try out, including all the favourites such as *kavarma*, *banitsa* and *shopska salad*.

DOS & DON'TS

Bulgarians are by and large a laid-back lot when it comes to behaviour at the table, although the usual Western rules of 'good manners' still apply when dining out. Obviously, these standards will vary according to where you are eating: street-bar patrons won't be shocked if you use your fingers to eat, for example, but it would certainly draw attention in a smart restaurant.

- *Molya* is the word used to attract the attention of a waiter.
- If service is good (and not included in the bill), leave a tip of 10%.
- If you're invited to dine at a Bulgarian home, it's traditional to bring flowers (an odd number – even numbers are for funerals).
- *Rakia* is drunk as an aperitif, so don't order one to go with your main meal, or, even worse, with your dessert.
- In most restaurants, the main dish, eg grilled chicken, will come without trimmings and you will have to order side dishes (*garnitura*) such as potatoes separately, but ask what's included first.

Useful Phrases

Can you recommend a ...?

Можете ли да пре-поръчате ...?	<i>mo-zhe-lee da pre-po-ruh-cha-te ...?</i>
bar	
бар	bar
café	
кафене	ka-fe-ne
pub	
кръчма	kruhch-ma
restaurant	
ресторант	res-to-rant
tavern	
механа	me-ha-na

Where would you go for ...?

Къде ходите да ...?	<i>kuh-de ho-dee-te da ...?</i>
a cheap meal	
хапнете свтино	hap-ne-te ev-tee-no
local specialities	
опитате местните специалитети	o-pee-ta-te mest-nee-te spe-tsee-a-lee-te-tee

I'd like to reserve a table for ...

Бих искал да запазя маса за ...	<i>beeh ee-skal da za-pa-zya ma-sa za ...</i>
(two) people	
двама (души)	dva-ma (doo-shee)
(eight) o'clock	
осем часа	o-sem cha-suh

Are you still serving food?

Сервирате ли все още?

I'm a vegetarian.

Вегетарианец съм.

Is it cooked in meat stock?

В месен бульон ли е приготвено?

What's in that dish?

Какво има в това ястие?

I'd like a local speciality.

Може ли местен специалитет.

I'd like the set menu, please.

Може ли пълното меню.

*mo-zhe lee puhl-no-to me-nyu***What are the daily specials?**

Какви са специалитетите за деня?

*kak-vee sa spe-tsee-a-lee-te-tee-te za de-nya?***What would you recommend?**

Какво ще ми препоръчате?

*kak-vo shte mee pre-po-ruh-cha-te?***I'd like (a/the) ..., please.**

Дайте ми ..., моля.

*dai-te mee ..., mol-yuh***bill**

сметката

*smet-ka-ta***drink list**

листата с напитките

*lees-ta-ta s na-peet-kee-te***menu (in English)**

менюто (на английски)

*me-nyoo-to (na an-glee-y-skee)***(non)smoking section**

маса за (не)пушачи

*ma-sa za (ne-)poo-sha-chee***table for (five)**

маса за (пет) човека

*ma-sa za (pet) cho-ve-ka***that dish**

онова блюдо

*o-no-va blyoo-do***Bon appétit!**

Добър апетит!

*do-buhr a-pe-tit!***Cheers!**

Наздраве!

*naz-dra-ve!***That was delicious!**

Това беше много вкусно!

*to-va be-she mno-go vkoos-no!***I'd like ..., please.**

Моля, ако обичате ...

*mol-yuh, a-ko o-bee-cha-te ...***a cup of tea/coffee**

чаша чай/кафе

*cha-sha chay/ka-fe***with (milk)**

с мляко

*s (mlya-ko)***without (sugar)**

без (захар)

*bez (za-har)***decaffeinated**

без кофеин

*bez ko-fe-een***iced coffee**

айскафе

*ais-ka-fe***strong coffee**

силно кафе

*seel-no ka-fe***Turkish coffee**

турско кафе

*toor-sko ka-fe***Viennese coffee**

виенско кафе

*vee-en-sko ka-fe***weak coffee**

слабо кафе

*sla-bo ka-fe***a bottle/glass of ... wine**

бутилка/чаша ... вино

*boo-teel-ka/cha-sha ... vee-no***dessert**

десертно

*de-sert-no***red**

червено

*cher-ve-no***sparkling**

шумящо

*shoo-myash-to***white**

бяло

*bya-lo***a ... of beer**

... бира

*... bee-ra***glass**

чаша

*cha-sha***jug**

кана

*ka-na***large bottle**

голяма бутилка

*go-lya-ma boo-teel-ka***small bottle**

малка бутилка

*mal-ka boo-teel-ka***Food Glossary****BASICS**

хляб

hlyab

bread

краве масло

kra-ve mas-lo

butter

сирене

see-re-ne

cheese

шоколад

sho-ko-lat

chocolate

яйца

yay-tsa

eggs

мед

met

honey

мляко

mlya-ko

milk

пипер

pee-per

pepper

ориз

o-rees

rice

сол

sol

salt

захар

za-har

sugar

кисело мляко

kee-se-lo mlya-ko

yogurt

MEAT

пиле

pee-le

chicken

рива

ree-ba

fish

шунка

shun-ka

ham

агнешко месо

ag-nesh-ko me-so

lamb

свинско

sveen-sko

pork

скарриди

ska-ree-dee

shrimp

език

e-zeek

tongue

телешко

te-lesh-ko

veal

VEGETABLES

син домат

seen do-mat

aubergine/eggplant

(зелен) боб

(ze-len) bob

(green) beans

зеле

ze-le

cabbage

морков

mor-kof

carrot

карфиол

kar-fee-ol

cauliflower

целина

tse-lee-na

celery

краставица

kras-ta-vee-tsa

cucumber

маруля

ma-ru-lya

lettuce

гъби

guh-bee

mushrooms

лук

luk

onions

грах

grah

peas

картоф

kar-tof

potato

домат

do-mat

tomato

DID YOU KNOW?

Although it might seem one of the most 'traditional' Bulgarian dishes, the origins of *shopska* salad are unclear, and it may have been created as recently as the 1950s.

SOUPS & SALADS

таратор	<i>ta-ra-tor</i>	chilled cucumber soup
шкѐмбе чорба	<i>shkem-be chor-ba</i>	tripe soup
шопска салата	<i>shopska sa-la-ta</i>	shopska salad
боб	<i>bob</i>	bean soup

FRUIT

ябълка	<i>ya-buhl-ka</i>	apple
кайсия	<i>kay-see-ya</i>	apricot
банан	<i>ba-nan</i>	banana
смокиня	<i>smo-ki-nya</i>	fig
грозде	<i>groz-de</i>	grapes
лимон	<i>lee-mon</i>	lemon
портокал	<i>por-to-kal</i>	orange
праскова	<i>pras-ko-va</i>	peach
круша	<i>kru-sha</i>	pear
слива	<i>sli-va</i>	plum
ягода	<i>ya-go-da</i>	strawberry

DRINKS

бира	<i>bee-ra</i>	beer
ракия	<i>ra-kee-ya</i>	brandy (local)
шампанско	<i>sham-pan-sko</i>	champagne
кафе	<i>ka-fe</i>	coffee
плодов сок	<i>plo-dof sok</i>	fruit juice
минерална вода	<i>mee-ne-ral-na vo-da</i>	mineral water
газирана ...	<i>ga-zee-ra-na ...</i>	sparkling ...
негазирана ...	<i>ne-ga-zee-ra-na ...</i>	still ...
портокалов сок	<i>por-to-ka-lov sok</i>	orange juice
безалкохолна	<i>bez-al-ko-hol-na</i>	soft drink
напитка	<i>na-peat-ka</i>	
чай	<i>chai</i>	tea
вино	<i>vee-no</i>	wine

Bulgarian Wine

Bulgaria's varied climates and grape varieties, along with its rich soil, have made the country legendary for its wine since Thracian times, as glittering ancient gold and silver vessels that depict bacchic merrymaking attest. Modern devotees of Bulgarian wine include Winston Churchill, who regularly ordered barrels of the local red from Melnik, a lovable little hamlet in the country's deep southwest, and centre of one of the best wine producing areas in the Balkans.

While the mass quantities produced during Soviet times have diminished as the country continues to make the transition to a free-market economy, a new emphasis on quality and foreign know-how are already bearing fruit, as a new standard of Bulgarian wine becomes increasingly known – and available – across the globe.

Wine-loving travellers setting out to see the country will find plenty of opportunities to get into Bulgarian wine, ranging from gourmet urban restaurants with the chic top brands, to wine cellars dug out of cliffs and little roadside stands. Just remember to indulge liberally – it's a time-honoured part of the Bulgaria experience.

HISTORY OF WINEMAKING IN BULGARIA

The origins of Bulgarian wine are shrouded in the mists of time, actually predating the modern state and even the Bulgarians themselves. The wine tradition here is so ancient and mythical that it can only be spoken of in divine company; Dionysus, the god of wine and revelry, adopted into the Greek pantheon but of Thracian stock, is represented on gold and silver drinking vessels depicting wine bacchanalias dug up by archaeologists in Bulgarian Thrace. Ancient poet Homer, presumably a bit of a tippler himself, sung the praises of Thracian wine almost 3000 years ago, retelling in *The Iliad* that Achaeans besieging Troy frequently ordered up black wine from the Thracians. Back then, wine was thick and sweet, and drunk diluted with water; drinking it straight was seen as fit only for a Scythian. Oenologists today consider that many of Bulgaria's seminal grapes, including the northern Gamza, and Mavrud and Melnishka from the south, probably derive from Thracian times.

Bulgaria's white wines emerged with the arrival of the Romans, who cultivated vineyards in the Black Sea regions of Pomorie and Nesebâr, according to another ancient poet, Ovid. With the 9th-century adoption of Christianity, winemaking continued under the care of monks – even though cranky King Krum tried to stamp it out (see the boxed text, p64). He was unsuccessful and, during the medieval Bulgarian kingdoms, vineyards flourished. After all, even in Christianity there was room for wine, the 'blood of Christ', and the Bulgarian monks even enforced new quality standards.

The excellence of Bulgarian wine was noted by Western 'guests' such as crusading count Geoffrey De Villehardouin, who in 1205 allegedly decided to spare the southern town of Asenograd – still today a major centre of winemaking – because of his fondness for the local libation. In the 14th and 15th centuries, Bulgarian wine was traded widely in Europe. During the middle Ottoman centuries, winemaking decreased but the situation improved during the National Revival period of the 18th and 19th centuries, when a new affluence bred sophisticated tastes. The grand aristocratic mansions that you see today also served as wine salons for entertaining

DID YOU KNOW?

Thanks to its Thracian forerunners, Bulgaria is one of the world's oldest winemaking lands.

DID YOU KNOW?

Winston Churchill was one of history's many famous lovers of Melnik red wine.

A ROYAL CASE OF SOUR GRAPES

Around the year 802, a teetotaling warlord by the name of Krum came to power in Bulgaria. A fierce and ambitious chap, Khan Krum sought to expand Bulgaria's borders at the expense of the Byzantine Empire, bringing about a savage war of attrition. The decade of war with the Byzantines involved offensives and counter-offensives, generous burning and pillaging, subterfuge and the slaughter of untold hapless civilians. It resulted in the Bulgars almost taking Constantinople and the victorious Krum, according to legend, drinking from the skull of the first of three Byzantine emperors he defeated, Nikephoros I.

The question remains: what was Krum drinking from said silver-lined skull? For aside from his martial success, the stern ruler was also known for his strict and unprecedented legal code, meant to enforce law and order across Bulgaria. Severe punishments were meted out for drunkenness and, tradition states, Khan Krum even ordered the wholesale destruction of vineyards.

Krum, however, did not last long, dying in 814 while preparing to attack the Byzantine capital, and the edict against winemaking died with him. Monks kept the traditions alive, building the earliest recorded cool cellars for storing the lovingly made holy elixir.

Nowadays, the sour-grapes king may well be turning in his grave, and not only because today's Bulgarian state is significantly smaller than the territory he fought ferociously to create; his ambivalent legacy is also wryly commemorated in a popular white wine, 'Khan Krum', produced near Shumen in east-central Bulgaria.

esteemed guests, and some, such as the Kordopoulov House in Melnik (see the boxed text, p68), were the property of wine merchants themselves.

The national euphoria at freedom, following the Russo-Turkish War in 1878, would be tempered for vintners a few years later, with devastating outbreaks of phylloxera (caused by a root-devouring aphid), which decimated vineyards. French experts were called in around the turn of the 20th century; their recommendations about what styles to concentrate on in particular – Mavrud and Pamid in the south, Gamza in the north – would have lasting importance, shaping the production patterns that still exist today. The foreign experts, consulted again during the following two decades, also urged Bulgarian vintners to plant popular varieties, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Riesling; again, their advice would prove auspicious.

Even before communism came in 1944, Bulgarian planters had started working in collectives. With the Soviet nationalisation of the industry, the state monopoly, Vinprom, made Bulgaria one of the world's biggest wine-producing countries – though the market was mostly limited to within the USSR. Bulgarian independence in 1990 brought both new opportunities for foreign investment and know-how, and also new problems involving property decentralisation – an issue that still vexes. Yet as the 1990s drew to a close, Bulgarian wine was appearing increasingly on foreign supermarket shelves.

State of the Industry

It hasn't been an unmitigated success story for the industry, however; Bulgarian wineries still need to develop the more lucrative export market for high-end wines. While partially a problem of perception for marketers to sort out, it's also caused by unresolved issues from Bulgaria's communist past. In 1996, Bulgarian vintners were exporting almost 30 million litres to Britain; 10 years later, however, that figure had waned to under 3 million litres. While 'devastating competition from California and the southern hemisphere' has been one reason for this, reported the *Financial Times* in a candid August 2007 article, the main problem involves denationalisation issues; the precious soil needed to grow the best grapes hasn't been freed up,

as selling land tracts belonging in pieces to several owners requires them all to agree on a sale, and all too often, they don't.

To build vineyards of profitable sizes and qualities requires foreign financial muscle and expertise. One success story here, according to the *Financial Times*, is Bessa Valley Vineyard near Pazardzhik, acquired by funds manager Dr Carl Heinz Hauptmann and the splendidly named Count Stephan von Neipperg, whose family pedigree for winemaking in France extends back 800 years. Today, Bessa Valley is one of the few Bulgarian wines to have cracked the £4.99 barrier on the British shelves, its Enira Merlot now going for almost 10 quid. With the help of foreign know-how and capital, Bulgarian wine can indeed be recognised as the world-class product Bulgarians have always believed it to be.

WINEMAKING REGIONS

Bulgaria is officially divided into five wine-producing regions, each with its own unique microclimate and grape varieties. Visiting them all is possible, though unless you're going on a prearranged and specific wine tour, it will take time to do so comprehensively. A summary of the regions and their characteristics follows, along with a short list of unique wineries in each. Contact the individual wineries if you'd like to arrange a tour.

Northern (Danube Plain)

The Danube gives Bulgaria's fertile northern plains a cool, Continental climate. The northern wine region comprises the area between this river and the Stara Planina mountain range that runs across central Bulgaria, hemmed in by the Serbian border to the west and the eastern Dobrudzha Valley. It boasts 35% of Bulgaria's vineyards.

The north is most known for Gamza, a light red dinner wine. Well-known foreign reds, such as Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot, are crafted here, as are whites such as Chardonnay, Riesling and Sauvignon Blanc. Other common northern wines include Muscat Ottonel, Aligoté and Pamid.

THE ART OF TASTING

Wine tasting is an art, a complex exercise that requires years of practice and, of course, unusually juxtaposed vocabulary. If you can conceptualise, however, you can learn how to impress in certain company.

1. Colour

Look through the wine, with the light behind it. Then tilt the glass slightly, and look through it towards a pale background. Clarity is the first category, and easy (good wines don't have floating particles), but colour, the second, is more complex. Most basically, deep colour indicates a strong wine. Colour also reveals the types of grapes used, and even the wine's age (in reds, a blue tint indicates youth, whereas an orange hue indicates age).

2. Smell

Swirl the wine, then smell it in one inhalation. The swirling summons up the wine's full bouquet. With eyes closed, concentrate on which of the 11 main smells associated with wine you pick up; they range from fruits to plants, herbs and spices, and more.

3. Taste

Now sip and swill the liquid around in your mouth; simultaneously, draw in some air to bring out the flavour. There are four possible flavours: bitter, acid, salty and sweet. Now swallow the wine, and wait; a fine wine should leave an aftertaste.

KEY WORDS

Degustatsija na vino:
it's Bulgarian for wine tasting.

WINERIES

Vinprom Rousse Winery (☎ 082-311 487; www.vinpromrousse.com in Bulgarian; ul Treti Mart 44, Ruse) Ruse's largest winery derives from the former Soviet monopoly. Following a 1998 privatisation it's modernised admirably, devoting energy and modern methods to developing quality white wines characteristic of the Danubian valley. It's especially known for the light local red, Gamza, but also produces quality Chardonnay, Sauvignon Blanc, Igri Blanc and Welschriesling, among others.

Lovico Suhindol (☎ 061-362 411; www.lovico.net; ul Rositsa 156, Suhindol) In Suhindol village near Veliko Târnovo, this venerable winery was founded in 1909 and was Bulgaria's first cooperative. It now produces over 6 million litres of wine and brandy per year. It specialises in the deep purple, slightly spicy Gamza (best after two or three years of ageing), Cabernet Sauvignon, Chardonnay and Muscat.

Eastern (Black Sea Coastal)

Bulgaria's narrow eastern winemaking region runs down the Black Sea coast, between Romania to the north and the border with Turkey to the south. More than half of the country's white grape varieties are cultivated here, with the long summers and mild autumns ensuring ideal conditions for the sugars necessary for white wine to develop in the grapes. The east accounts for 30 percent of Bulgaria's vineyards, with major centres being in Targovishte, Preslav and Strandja. Among the best known wines created here are Dimyat, Traminer, Riesling, Muscat Ottonel, Sauvignon Blanc and Gewürztraminer.

WINERIES

Chateau Euxinograde (☎ 052-393 165; www.euxinograde.com; Varna) Housed in the former royal palace north of Varna on the Black Sea, this winery was established in 1891 by Prince Battenberg; snatched later by the communists, from 1944 to 1989 it catered to high officials of the party. The 90-hectare Euxinograde complex offers no ordinary wine tour; the stately palace features elaborate period furnishings, botanical gardens with rare plants, and the impressive old wine collections of Prince Ferdinand and Tsar Boris III, which includes astonishing treasures such as a Chateau Margaux from 1904.

The winery is known for its delicate Riesling and rich yet mild Traminer, a favourite white wine of Bulgarian connoisseurs, along with its beloved French-style brandy, Euxignac.

LVK-Vinprom Targovishte (☎ 060-164 751; bul 29 Januari 8, Targovishte) An illustrious microregion for winemaking is Targovishte, near Veliko Târnovo, and its wines have won numerous prizes at international fairs. LVK-Vinprom is the largest area vintner and you can visit the winery and its vineyards bursting with grapes at nearby Kravevo. Targovishte wines, both red and white, sparkle and are good dinner wines.

Domaine Boyar (☎ 02-969 7980; www.domaineboyar.com; Zlaten Rog 20-22, Sofia) This leading winery emerged soon after the demise of communism, and has become one of Bulgaria's top exporters to the West. The results of the considerable investments in modern technology and techniques have been numerous awards at international fairs, and a very competitive position among all producers in Eastern and Central Europe. In 2005 it boosted its elite image by becoming the official importer of champagnes drunk in the narrowest of circles – the royal families of Britain, Sweden, Spain and Monaco.

With vineyards in both the eastern Black Sea region and on the Thracian plain, Domaine Boyar produces the best of both Bulgaria's whites and reds. The winery offers a tasting tour to eastern vineyards near Shumen. Professional guides inform about the winery's history, and Bulgarian winemaking in general, and of course serve you the winery's spectacular Chardonnay (among others).

The Valley of Roses (Sub-Balkan)

A small but significant winemaking area is in the Valley of Roses, just south of the Stara Planina mountain range and north of Plovdiv. Known more for its historic production of rose oil, the rich fields of the region are ideal for the production of dry whites, the Misket being the most unique white variety, produced from a grape that grows better here than anywhere else in Bulgaria.

Thracian Lowland (South Bulgarian)

The Thracian lowlands, beginning south of the Stara Planina range and extending to the Sakar Mountain and Maritsa River, are protected from the cold northern air by the mountains and have hot, dry summers. One important subregion, the Bessa Valley, has a history of winemaking going back to the 5th-century BC Thracian Bessi tribe. This region produces one of Bulgaria's most famous wines, Mavrud, a famous local red that ages well. It also produces Merlot, Cabernet Sauvignon, Muscatel and Pamid.

WINERIES

Bessa Valley Winery (☎ 0889499992; www.bessavalley.com; Ognyanovo village) This impressive, foreign-owned winery has attracted international attention for its Merlot, Syrah, Petit Verdot and Cabernet Sauvignons, crafted from select, hand-picked grapes aged in French oak barrels. Tasting tours involve also seeing the impressive facilities, which include an enormous rotunda and arched pergola; the limestone cellar walls are flecked with the fossils of ancient sea creatures.

Bessa Valley's flagship brand, Enira, combines Merlot (80%) and Cabernet Sauvignon (20%); the wine retains a complex bouquet, both spicy and redolent of fruits. The innovative Enira (2004 vintage) took first prize at Bulgaria's prestigious Vinaria competition. The well-organised winery tour, involving sampling of three wines accompanied by cheeses and meats, lasts two hours and costs 12 lv.

Todoroff Wine Cellars (02-985 4785; www.todoroff-wines.com) Now one of Bulgaria's premier wineries, in Brestovitsa, 15km southwest of Plovdiv, this winery was created over the ruins of a neglected communist-era one in 1999 by Ivan Todoroff, lover of the arts and wine. While he wished only to create a small winery sufficient for himself and his friends, word spread and demand grew. Now, while remaining very much a boutique place, Todoroff Wine Cellars is one of Bulgaria's most revered names. It's especially known for its juicy, red Mavrud, one of two truly representative Bulgarian varieties (along with Melnik wine from the southwest). Todoroff's 'Mystery of Thrace' is a deep red with an intriguing bouquet, combining the aromas of cherry and vanilla, oak and spice. Vineyard tours may also include sampling traditional cuisine, spa hotel accommodation and even grape picking.

Struma River Valley (Pirin Mountains)

Although Bulgaria's southwestern corner accounts for only 6% of the country's vineyards, its wines are among the best. This area bounded by the River Struma and Pirin Mountains is geographically known as Pirin

DID YOU KNOW?

No Man's Land wine, produced by Damianitza, is made from grapes grown in the once forbidden border-zone fields between Bulgaria and Greece.

WHERE TO STICK IT

People are used to dropping coins into wishing wells. But what about a wishing wall?

Tranquil Melnik, in Bulgaria's southwestern Pirin region, is famous for both its winemaking tradition and its National Revival-era houses. The two unite at the magnificent cliffside **Kordopoulov House** (p135), once owned by a prosperous 18th-century vintner. This marvellously furnished house-museum, said to be the biggest in the Balkans, still produces its own wine, storing it in a labyrinthine cellar where, at the end, rows of glittering coins have been stuck into the soft stone comprising the dug-out cellar wall. The coins are gestures of good wishes from many happy visitors, hoping for a future of good crops and good rains, to keep Melnik's rich red wines flowing for future enjoyment. If you share this warm sentiment (and after a glass or two of the house wine, you will be feeling very warm indeed), stick a coin of your own into the wall.

Macedonia, and indeed the arid, Mediterranean climate and soil are similar to those of the neighbouring Republic of Macedonia to the west and the Greek province of Macedonia to the south. It's the hottest part of the country, with very dry summers and mild winters.

The most famous wine here is Melnik's signature red, the Shiroka Melnishka Loza, while Cabernet Sauvignon and Merlot are also produced. Melnik wines, still stored in catacomb-like cellars dug out of chalky cliffs, are full-bodied and improve with age. Another unique local variety, the Keratzuda, is unique to Kresna, a village between Blagoevgrad and Sandanski.

WINERIES

Damianitza (☎ 0746-300 90; www.damianitza.bg) The leading producer of the famed Melnik wine, Damianitza dates from 1940 but was privatised in 1997 and subsequently modernised. Damianitza has been innovative, fashioning new tastes by combining the local Melnik grape with Cabernet Sauvignon, creating Ruen, and similarly combining Nebbiolo and Syrah varieties to create Rubin, a unique Damianitza wine now regarded as one of Bulgaria's best. Signature wines include the ReDark and Unicato, hearty, barrel-aged reds full of character.

Environment

THE LAND

Bulgaria covers just under 111,000 sq km at the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, and in that relatively small area encompasses an amazing variety of landscapes and landforms. About one-third of Bulgaria's terrain is mountainous and the country boasts seven distinct mountain ranges, each with a unique range of flora and fauna, and all covered with well-marked walking trails.

From the northern border with Romania, a windswept fertile plain gradually slopes south as far as the Stara Planina mountains, the longest mountain range in the Balkans, which virtually splits the country in half. To the south, the Sredna Gora mountains are separated from the main range by a fault in which the Valley of Roses lies.

Mt Musala (2925m), in the rugged and floriferous Rila Mountains south of Sofia, is almost equalled in height by Mt Vihren (2915m) in the wild Pirin Mountains further south. The Rila Mountains' sharply glaciated massifs, with their bare rocky peaks, steep forested valleys and glacial lakes, are the geographical core of the Balkans and a paradise for hikers (and, in parts, skiers). The Rodopi Mountains stretch along the Greek border east of the Rila and Pirin Mountains and spill over into Greece. The fascinating Yagodina and Trigard caves (p162) are geological must-sees in the Rodopis, while Melnik's (p134) dramatic and unique sand pyramids are one of the more unusual highlights of the Pirin region.

The Thracian plain opens onto the Black Sea coast. The 378km-long coast is lined with beaches and also features coastal lakes near Burgas, spectacular cliffs near Kaliakra and several gaping bays. In addition to the mighty Danube, which forms much of the border with Romania, the major rivers include the Yantra, which meanders its way through the town of Veliko Târnovo; the Iskâr, which stretches from south of Samokov to the Danube, past Sofia; and the Maritsa, which crawls through Plovdiv.

WILDLIFE

Though not an especially large country, Bulgaria packs in a huge and diverse array of flora and fauna, helped by the varied climate and topography, relatively small human population, and the fact that almost a third of the country is forested. However, all environmental groups believe that the

RESPONSIBLE TRAVEL

Everyone travelling to Bulgaria can minimise the impact of their visit. Try to conserve water and electricity, respect traditions in villages, and leave ruins as they are. In addition, don't litter and don't destroy flora and fauna. Driving is often an ideal way to get around, but please bear in mind that traffic and air and noise pollution are increasing problems in Bulgaria.

One local organisation promoting sustainable alternative tourism is the **Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism** (BAAT; ☎ 02-980 7685; www.baatbg.org), which publishes the excellent *Bulgaria Bed & Breakfasts Guidebook*, a compendium of family-run guesthouses and off-the-beaten-track itinerary ideas. **Zig Zag Holidays** (☎ /fax 02-980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com) is a leading tour operator running ecologically sensitive trips and activities (see p86). It also sells BAAT's guidebook. The **Bulgarian Association for Rural & Ecological Tourism** (BARET; ☎ 02-979 3363; baret@aster.net) is a major national NGO promoting village and country regions and the development of sustainable rural tourism.

future of Bulgaria's ecology is at a critical stage and that local and international action is urgently needed before the environmental damage already caused becomes irreversible.

Animals

Bulgaria is home to some 56,000 kinds of animal, including almost 400 species of birds (about 75% of all species found in Europe), 36 types of reptiles, over 200 species of freshwater and saltwater fish (of which about half are found along the Black Sea coast of Bulgaria) and 27,000 types of insect.

Many larger animals are elusive and live in the hills and mountains, some way from urban centres, but if you are keen to see some natural fauna, join an organised tour (see p301 and p304). Alternatively, hike in the Strandzha Nature Park (p227); the Rusenski Lom Nature Park (p273), home to 67 species of mammals (about two-thirds of those found in Bulgaria); the Rila National Park (p116); or the Pirin National Park (p124), where 42 species of animals, such as the European brown bear, deer and wild goats thrive.

Bird-lovers can admire plenty of our feathered friends at Burgas Lakes (p220), the largest wetland complex in the country, and home to about 60% of all bird species in Bulgaria; the Ropotamo Nature Reserve (p224), with more than 200 species of birds; Lake Srebarna (p274), also with over 200 bird species; the Strandzha Nature Park (p227), with almost 70% of all bird species found in Bulgaria; and the Rusenski Lom Nature Park (p273), home to 170 species of water birds. White storks, black storks, Dalmatian pelicans, sandpipers, corncrakes and pygmy cormorants are some of the species that can be seen in these areas.

ENDANGERED SPECIES

Included in the official list of the endangered animals of Bulgaria are seals and dolphins, both of which were hunted ruthlessly in the past (dolphin hunting was banned in Bulgaria in 1966) but can still be seen in sadly decreasing numbers off the northern part of the Black Sea coast.

Bulgaria has one of the largest brown bear populations in Europe (the last estimate was around 1000 individuals), and numbers are increasing, thanks to a ban on hunting, although farmers are still allowed to apply for hunting licences in areas where bears have attacked livestock. There are thought to be around 200 bears in the southeastern Rodopis, and 15 even live on Mt Vitoshka, on the outskirts of the capital city. However, unless you're on a wildlife-spotting tour, you're extremely unlikely to see a bear, let alone get close enough to be mauled by one; if you are confronted, don't run (they're faster than you) but instead, back away slowly, discarding clothing or food items for the bear to investigate, and, ahem, hope for the best.

The cruel practice of 'dancing' bears was officially banned in 1993, and rescued bears now live in the **Dancing Bears Park** (☎ 0887866189; www.vierfoten.org; 🕒 10am-6pm Apr & May, to 8pm Jun-Sep, to 4pm Oct & Nov) in Belitsa, in the Rila Mountains. Located around 33km northeast of Bansko (and 12km outside the village of Belitsa itself), the park is the largest of its kind in Europe, and visitors are welcome to join guided tours. You will need your own transport to visit. The park is dependent on donations, and it costs €10 for basic care for just one bear for one day, so anything you can spare will be appreciated. As well as helping these abused animals, the park also provides employment in a poor region of the country and it is hoped that this will become a significant ecotourism draw in the future.

Visit www.panda.org/bulgaria to see what environmental projects and campaigns the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) is currently involved in.

There are thought to be around 2000 wolves in the country, and lynxes, previously presumed extinct, were officially 'rediscovered' in 2003, though exact numbers of these elusive creatures are uncertain. Again, you'll be very lucky to see these animals in the wild.

Rare insects include the Bulgarian Emerald dragonfly, only discovered in 1999. It is thought only to inhabit a small area of the Eastern Rodopi mountains and neighbouring areas of Greece and Turkey.

Various species of rare birds, including Egyptian vultures, lesser kestrels and great eagle owls, are protected in the Rusenski Lom Nature Park, while small cormorants, Ferruginous ducks and Dalmatian pelicans thrive in the Srebarna Nature Reserve. The Imperial eagle is one of Bulgaria's most threatened birds – only around 18 pairs are believed to exist in the wild today – while the distinctive-looking Tengmalm's owl is another scarce species. Saker falcons have been brought close to extinction in Bulgaria, due to the illegal falconry trade and egg collectors.

Plants

Of Bulgaria's 10,000 or so plant species, 31 are endangered. About 250 are endemic and many have indigenous names, such as Bulgarian blackberry and Rodopi tulip. The *silivriak*, with its small pink flowers, grew all over Europe before the last Ice Age, but is now found only in southern Bulgaria, particularly in the Rodopi Mountains, where it's reasonably abundant. The wonderfully named Splendid Tulip, with its large red flowers, is extremely rare, and was only discovered in 1976, near Yambol. It has been found nowhere else, and you'll be very lucky to spot it: only around 20 plants are known to exist.

Squeezed between the mighty Stara Planina and Sredna Gora ranges, the Valley of Roses was, until recently, the source of 70% of the world's supply of rose oil. Roses are still grown there extensively, and can be seen and enjoyed most of the year.

Forests are also protected in the national parks and reserves. The Strandzha Nature Park (p227) contains vast areas of oaks and beeches. The Unesco-protected Pirin National Park (p124) boasts about 1100 species of flora, and the Central Balkan National Park (www.centralbalkan-nationalpark.org) encompasses ancient fir, spruce and hornbeam forests and mountain meadows, and supports some 2340 plant species, several of which are found nowhere else.

NATIONAL PARKS

The Bulgarian government has officially established three national parks – Rila, Pirin and Central Balkan – where the flora, fauna and environment are (in theory) protected. Besides the three officially protected national parks, which do not include any towns or villages, Bulgaria has 10 'nature parks', which do include permanent settlements, and nature reserves, which are unique managed ecosystems. The latter category receives the strictest protection, and access is often regulated or even prohibited. Confusingly, the term national park is regularly used to describe parks in any of these categories. Throughout this book we have followed the usual local usage for park names. For further information about the parks and reserves, visit www.bulgariannationalparks.org.

Environmental groups continue to lobby the Bulgarian government to expand areas already under protection and create new parks and reserves, especially in the unprotected Rodopi Mountains and along the Black Sea coast.

DID YOU KNOW?

The *silivriak* is also known as the Orpheus flower; legend says that its flowers were stained pink with the blood of the divine musician after he was hacked to pieces by the frenzied Bacchantes.

National Park/ Reserve	Features	Activities	Best time to visit	Page
Central Balkan National Park	mountains, forests, waterfalls & canyons; wolves, otters, wild cats, rare birds & bats	hiking, caving & horse riding	May-Sep	p71
Pirin National Park	mountains & lakes; bears, deer & birds	hiking	Jun-Sep	p124
Rila National Park	alpine forests & pastures; deer, wild goats & eagles	hiking	Jun-Sep	p116
Ropotamo Nature Reserve	marshes & sand dunes; rare birds	boat trips & hiking	Apr-Jul	p224
Rusenski Lom Nature Park	river banks, valleys & mountains; rare birds; rock churches	bird-watching & caving	Jun-Sep	p273
Strandzha Nature Park	varied forest & beaches; birds & mammals; archaeological ruins	hiking & bird- watching	Jun-Aug	p227
Vitosha Nature Park	mountain trails	hiking & skiing	Apr-Aug & Dec-Jan	p109
Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park	forest, varied tree life & caves	hiking & caving	Jun-Sep	p266

ENVIRONMENTAL ISSUES

Like most postcommunist countries, the lure of fast cash has often outweighed ecologically sustainable development. Logging, poaching and insensitive development continue in protected areas and excessive and harmful air and water pollution is infrequently controlled. Finite fossil fuels, such as coal, are still used for generating electricity, and farmers continually (and illegally) clear land by burning, which causes many devastating fires each summer.

Tourism & Transport Development

The big money to be made in Bulgaria's growing tourism industry has resulted in a spate of huge construction projects, notably along the Black Sea coast and in the skiing resorts, and accusations of corruption and thoughtless profiteering have been thrown at the developers and officials involved by concerned environmentalists. Large swaths of the coastline seem to be disappearing under a sea of concrete and cranes as local municipalities and private developers try to grab more land and yet more holiday home complexes, hotels and marinas are constructed.

In 2006, the government agreed to allow investors to develop Bulgaria's longest natural, untouched beach – Kamchiiski Pyasãtsi, near Shkorpilovtsi – for tourism development, in return for agricultural land elsewhere, while in 2007 there was an uproar when the Supreme Court rescinded Strandzha Nature Park's protected status, which allowed a hotel complex to be built inside the park – Tsarevo Municipality and the investment company, Krash 2000, had claimed the park's borders were unclear, even though they are clearly marked on official maps. The Bulgarian Parliament eventually overturned the decision, after initially refusing to respond to petitions and demonstrations, and pleas from international bodies such as the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

In 2003 a highly controversial new ski centre was opened in the heart of the (supposedly) protected Pirin National Park, near Bansko. Thousands of hectares of trees were felled, and huge disruption was caused to the natural habitat. Outraged environmentalists feared that it might set a precedent for the development of more ski runs in Pirin National Park and other protected mountain ranges, and they were right. After years of opposition, the go-ahead

was finally given in 2007 for the so-called Super-Borovets mega ski resort, which will encompass the towns of Samokov and Beli Iskãr as well as expand Borovets itself. There will be 19 new ski runs, with a combined length of 42km, as well as hotels and holiday apartments. The scale of the project has been heavily criticised by environmental campaigners.

One bone of contention through 2007 has been the Natura 2000 scheme (www.natura.org), the European network of protected nature sites. The Bulgarian government came in for criticism domestically, and, more importantly, from the EU, for its tardiness to supply the full list of areas to be included on time, and its apparent unwillingness to comply with its legal obligations; the government removed half the areas to be listed, citing, astonishingly, the 'interest of investors' in supposedly protected areas around the Black Sea coast and the mountains, when only scientific criteria were to be used. Under threats of fines, the government has relented, and more sites have now been submitted for protected listing.

Nuclear Energy

Bulgaria's only nuclear power plant – at Kozlodui (www.kznpp.org) near the Danube, about 200km north of Sofia – was once rated as one of the world's most dangerous nuclear facilities. Since opening in 1974, minor accidents have periodically forced partial shutdowns, leading to power cuts across the country. Massive pressure and financial aid from the EU convinced the Bulgarian authorities to close two of the facility's reactors in December 2002, and to carry out vital upgrades. Independent safety checks in 2003 praised its 'high technical standards', and it is now regarded as one of the safest in Europe. It remains an important supplier of the country's electricity, but four more reactors are due to close in 2009, and the plant itself should finally go offline in 2013.

Kozlodui will be replaced with another nuclear plant at Belene (www.belene-npp.com). The government gave the go-ahead for its construction in 2004, but the project has been dogged by controversy and protests from environmentalists, who claim the building of this facility in an earthquake-prone area poses particular dangers, but after much discussion the EU finally agreed to the plans in late 2007 and Belene is expected to start generating power in 2014.

Pollution

Pollution from effluent along the Black Sea coast continues to be an issue, while another big concern is the Danube, which is often heavily polluted before it even reaches Bulgaria (see the boxed text, p261). Bulgaria's coal-fired power stations also pose environmental hazards. The largest, Maritsa East 2, near Stara Zagora, has been behind schedule in its efforts to meet strict EU emission standards by 2008 and is working to upgrade its facilities. There have also been worries about maintaining energy supplies once the Kozlodui nuclear plant closes down in 2013.

The ageing Kremikovtsi steel plant outside Sofia has also been grappling with long-standing pollution problems, and is attempting to modernise its facilities in order to meet EU guidelines on emissions by 2011, but huge investments are needed.

The proposed construction of the open-pit Ada Tepe gold mine near Krumovgrad in the Rodopis has been highly controversial, with campaigners protesting that the cyanide-leaching process used to extract the gold would pose huge health risks to the local population. Thracian archaeological remains have already been bulldozed on top of Ada Tepe hill in preparation for the pit, but continuing objections have delayed the opening.

Visit www.bluelink.net, the best website for environmental news, with details of current campaigns and projects and lots of useful links.

For details of the campaign against the proposed gold mine in the Rodopi Mountains, visit www.cyanidefreerhodopi.org.

Environmental Organisations

The Bulgarian Green Party (www.greenparty.bg) was one of the first opposition parties to be formed in the wake of the collapse of the communist government in December 1989, and though initially scoring some success, it has performed poorly in subsequent elections.

Anyone with genuine interest in a specific ecological issue can contact one or more of the following organisations. Apart from Neophron, these groups do not, however, provide tourist information or offer tours. For some companies that offer environmental tours, see p304.

Bulgarian Association for Alternative Tourism (BAAT; ☎ 02-980 7685; www.baatbg.org; bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia) The biggest tourist nongovernment organisation (NGO) in Bulgaria supports small businesses and organisations involved in sustainable tourism development across the country.

Bulgarian Biodiversity Foundation (☎ 02-931 6183; www.bbf.biodiversity.bg) A nonprofit organisation active in the conservation of Bulgaria's natural heritage and promoting sustainable development.

Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB; ☎ 02-971 5855; www.bspb.org) The BSPB helps to protect bird life and their habitats and proudly claims to have reintroduced an extinct species, the cinereous vulture. It's part of BirdLife International.

Ekoglasnost (☎ 02-986 2221) The local Friends of the Earth affiliate in Sofia.

Green Balkans (☎ 032-626 977; www.greenbalkans.org) Based in Plovdiv, Green Balkans is a major nature conservation NGO comprising four regional societies, organising campaigns and promoting biodiversity in Bulgaria and the Balkan peninsula.

Neophron (☎ 052-650 230; www.neophron.com; PO Box 492, Varna) Based in Varna, Neophron is an ecological tour agency run by the BSPB, offering bird-watching, bear-watching and botany trips around Bulgaria.

Za Zemiata (☎ 02-943 1123; www.zazemiata.org) 'For the Earth' is an environmental NGO that coordinates various campaigns on issues including pollution and sustainable energy.

The Balkani Wildlife Society (www.balkani.org) is active in environmental conservation programmes around the country and in raising public awareness of wildlife issues.

Activities

Bulgaria's mountainous, heavily forested terrain makes for great hiking, mountaineering and skiing, while on the Black Sea coast, you can indulge in an array of water sports from paragliding to scuba diving, although these tend to be confined to the big package-holiday resorts. In addition, travel agencies organise a wide range of activity and special-interest holidays, including bird-watching, wildlife-spotting, botanical and archaeological tours.

HIKING

Hiking has long been a hugely popular activity in Bulgaria, and with distinctive mountain ranges covering a third of the country, and some 37,000km of marked trails to follow, it's easy to see why. The trans-European hiking trails E3, E4 and E8 all cross through Bulgaria. The E3 trail, which begins in Spain, follows the crest of the Stara Planina range from Belogradchik eastwards to the coast at Cape Ermine, and is well signposted along the way. If you want to go the whole way, count on taking around 20 days or so. The E4 and E8 trails both pass through Rila National Park and offer varied scenery and difficulty.

Walkers are well supported, with numerous *hizhas* (mountain huts) along the more popular tracks, as well as in real wilderness areas. It's one of the more positive legacies of the old communist regime, which believed that hiking was a healthy and productive proletarian pastime.

The standard of accommodation at these huts varies greatly, ranging from the simplest wooden shacks with only the most rudimentary of facilities for an overnight stop, to cosy hostels with kitchens, cafés and even shops attached. These huts only provide the basics and are not intended for lengthy stays.

If you intend doing some serious walking, you will need a detailed map of the region you're visiting. The main publisher of hiking maps is Kartografia, which produces *Pirin* (1:55,000), *Rila* (1:55,000) and separate maps for the east and west Rodopis (both 1:100,000). All are printed in English, German and Bulgarian and cost about 6 lv to 8 lv each. Maps of the central and west Rodopi Mountains (both 1:100,000) are issued by YEO-Rhodope and contain marked trails and details of sights and accommodation in the area. The handy *Troyan Balkan* map (1:65,000) covers the Stara Planina.

SAFETY GUIDELINES FOR WALKING

Before embarking on a walking trip, consider the following points to ensure a safe and enjoyable experience:

- Pay any fees and possess any permits required by local authorities.
- Be sure you are healthy and feel comfortable walking for a sustained period.
- Obtain reliable information about physical and environmental conditions along your intended route (eg from park authorities).
- Be aware of local laws, regulations and etiquette about wildlife and the environment.
- Walk only in regions, and on trails within your realm of experience.
- Be aware that weather conditions and terrain vary significantly from one region, or even from one trail to another. Seasonal changes can significantly alter any trail. These differences influence the way walkers dress and the equipment they carry.
- Ask before you set out about the environmental characteristics that can affect your walk and how local, experienced walkers deal with these considerations.

The Rila Mountains are a rugged, rocky, heavily forested range with plunging glacial valleys and rich plant life. One of the most attractive and accessible walking routes heads into the Maliovitza range, south of the small town of the same name and based around soaring Mt Maliovitza (2729m). Happily, one of Bulgaria's more comfortable mountain huts, Hizha Rilski Ezera, is along this route.

Another relatively easy and very pleasant walk runs along the Rilska *reka* (Rilska river) towards the magnificent Rila Monastery, passing through Kiril Meadow along the way.

The Pirins offer some of the very finest walking country in Bulgaria. It's an alpine landscape of glacial valleys and lakes, and the climate is blessed with a moderating Mediterranean influence.

The Sredna Gora is the highest, most visited section of the Stara Planina, with hundreds of marked tracks and the largest number of *hizas*. The Stara Planina is noted for its sudden weather changes, and some of Bulgaria's highest rainfalls and strongest winds have been recorded here, so be prepared. September is the most amenable month for walking. Camping out is discouraged at all times, due to bears and adverse weather.

Travel agencies running organised hiking trips include **Zig Zag Holidays** (Map p88; ☎ 02-980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia), which offers tailor-made itineraries as well as standard trips, such as its five-day hike in the Rodopi Mountains (€169 per person in a group of four) – challenging but suitable for most people of average fitness, with four to six hours hiking each day. The price includes four nights full-board accommodation. Its 11-day 'Alpine Moods of Bulgaria' trip (€350 per person in a group of six) is meant for more experienced hikers and includes the E4 trail in the Rila and Pirin Mountains.

Balkan Trek (☎ 02-973 3595; www.balkantrek.com) also runs guided hiking tours in the Pirin, Rila and Balkan mountain ranges; see the website for departure dates and prices.

Mountain Adventures in Bulgaria (www.bghike.com) is a specialist company running guided hiking and trekking excursions that is happy to make tailor-made arrangements if you have any special interests or limited time. Its nine-day hike round the Rila Mountains costs €380 per person including full-board accommodation.

Walking Softly Adventures (☎ 1888 743 0723; www.walkingsoftly.com) is a US-based company that runs hiking tours all over the world. Its 10-night Mountains of Bulgaria trip costs US\$3150 per person.

MOUNTAINEERING

With seven major mountain ranges squeezed into such a small geographical area, Bulgaria is a paradise for climbers. The **Bulgarian Climbing & Mountaineering Federation** (☎ 02-987 1798; www.bfka.org) in Sofia is the main organisation worth contacting for information, advice and details of guides. Also in Sofia, **Club Extreme** (www.dubextreme.org) offers the services of professional guides. Prices vary and are dependent on where and when you want to go. Shops such as Stenata (p104) can provide gear, which will probably work out cheaper than in Western Europe.

The most popular areas for mountaineering are the Rila, Pirin and Stara Planina mountain ranges. The Rila Mountains (p115) are the highest range in the country boasting well over a hundred alpine peaks more than 1000m in height, including the highest peak in Bulgaria, Mt Musala (2925m), and some 180 clear, bubbling streams and placid lakes. Mt Maliovitza (2729m), reached from the town of Maliovitza, is one of the prime climbing peaks here. Note that snow and low temperatures persist at higher levels even into summer.

Visit www.bulgarian-nationalparks.org for comprehensive information on Bulgaria's three national parks.

TOP HIZHAS

- Hizha Rilski Ezera (Rila Mountains; p123)
- Hizha Banderitsa (Pirin Mountains; p133)
- Hizha Vihren (Pirin Mountains; p133)
- Hizha Kamenitsa (Pirin Mountains; p133)
- Hizha Kuker (Vitosha Nature Park; p111)
- Hizha Skakavitza (Rila Mountains; p123)

The sparsely inhabited Pirin Mountains (p124) are another alpine range in the southwest, with three peaks above 2900m and almost a hundred above 2500m. It's a typical alpine landscape of cirques and ridges. The mountains were named after the Slavic god of thunder, Perun, who is said to have once lived atop the highest peak here, Mt Vihren (2915m). The northern face of Vihren is the most popular climb in this region and can be reached via Bansko (p127).

The 550km-long Balkan Range (or Stara Planina; literally 'Old Mountains') cuts right across the country from Serbia almost as far as the Black Sea, and acts as a climatic barrier between the north and south of Bulgaria, with the northern side significantly colder. It's a huge, diverse area, covering 10% of Bulgaria's territory. Due to its relatively easy access (from Vratsa) and the variety of routes offered, the most frequented section of this mighty range is the Vratsa Rocks in the far west, the largest limestone climbing area in Bulgaria. Mt Botev (2376m), inside the Central Balkan National Park, is another popular climb, with easy access from Karlovo.

Odyssea-In (below) and Zig Zag Holidays (p75) in Sofia are the best people to contact for a wide array of guided climbing trips; contact them for current itineraries and costs.

ROCK CLIMBING

Another outdoor activity that has become very popular in Bulgaria is rock climbing, and there are numerous locations around the country where you can indulge in a bit of clambering, either independently, or with a qualified guide – essential for some of the tougher areas. A good place to start is www.climbingguidebg.com, which has lots of information, advice and links.

The main area for rock climbing is around Vratsa (p265) where there are some 333 identified climbing routes and a variety of climbing conditions including alpine, sport and ice climbing. The area of Vratsata, on the road to the Ledenika Cave, is a popular spot, with permanent bolts attached to the rock face.

Other areas include the Pirin Mountains, with 31 alpine and traditional climbing routes, although these are only suitable for experienced climbers. The north face of Mt Vihren, to the south of Bansko, is particularly challenging. Maliovitza (p122), in the Rila Mountains, is home to the Central Mountain School, which offers rock climbing activities and guides in the Maliovitza range. Again, these are quite serious climbs, and safety nets are provided. The Vitosha mountain range and the Stara Planina are the other main areas for rock climbing, with many different routes for climbers of varying abilities.

A number of tour agencies offer guided climbing trips. The most experienced are the hearty outdoors folk at **Odyssea-In** (Map p88; ☎ 02-989 0538; www.odyssea-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia) who offer three-day rock-climbing trips in various areas, according to your own abilities and preferences, for €235 per person, for a group of two. The price for individuals is €375.

Join author Robert Reid as he takes to the Bulgarian mountains, picking up hitchhiking weightlifters, metal-heads and grandmothers along the way. Visit www.lonelyplanet.com/bulgarianhitchhikers

RESPONSIBLE HIKING

To help preserve the ecology and beauty of Bulgaria, consider the following tips when hiking.

Rubbish

- Carry out all your rubbish. Don't overlook easily forgotten items, such as silver paper, orange peel, cigarette butts and plastic wrappers. Empty packaging should be stored in a dedicated rubbish bag. Make an effort to carry out rubbish left by others.
- Never bury your rubbish: digging disturbs soil and ground cover and encourages erosion. Buried rubbish will likely be dug up by animals, who may be injured or poisoned by it. It may also take years to decompose.
- Sanitary napkins, tampons, condoms and toilet paper should be carried out despite the inconvenience. They burn and decompose poorly.

Human Waste Disposal

- Contamination of water sources by human faeces can lead to the transmission of all sorts of nasties. Where there is a toilet, please use it. Where there is none, bury your waste. Dig a small hole 15cm (6in) deep and at least 100m (320ft) from any watercourse. Cover the waste with soil and a rock. In snow, dig down to the soil.
- Ensure that these guidelines are applied to a portable toilet tent if one is being used by a large trekking party.

Washing

- Don't use detergents or toothpaste in or near watercourses, even if they are biodegradable.
- For personal washing, use biodegradable soap and a water container (or even a lightweight, portable basin) at least 50m (160ft) away from the watercourse. Disperse the waste water widely to allow the soil to filter it fully.
- Wash cooking utensils 50m (160ft) from watercourses using a scourer, sand or snow instead of detergent.

Erosion

- Hillsides and mountain slopes, especially at high altitudes, are prone to erosion. Stick to existing trails/tracks and avoid short cuts.
- Avoid removing the plant life that keeps topsoils in place.

Trapezitsa (Map p172; ☎ 062-621 593; www.trapezitsa-1902.hit.bg; ul Stefan Stambolov 79, Veliko Tŕnovo) offers a number of itineraries, including to the nearby Sveta Troitsa area as well as artificial walls to practice on.

Bulgarian Mountain Tours (☎ 01516-480 699; www.bulgarianmountaintours.com) is an excellent UK-based company that organises a variety of outdoorsy activities in Bulgaria such as walking, rock climbing, fishing and bird-watching. It also arranges accommodation.

SKIING

If there's one outdoor activity that Bulgaria is famous for, it's skiing. There has been massive investment in developing resorts in the country in recent years, and environmentalists have been highly critical of some of the more ambitious schemes (see p72).

Bansko (p127) is the number one resort in the country, with the most modern facilities, the longest snow season and the biggest international profile, attracting tourists from all over the world. It has also seen the heaviest

investment, with numerous hotels and holiday apartments being built. There are now two ski centres – Chalin Valog (1100m to 1600m) and Shiligarnika (1700m to 2500m), roughly 10km from town and accessed from Bansko by gondola. All abilities are well catered for. Snow cover here lasts from December to May, helped in part by the use of artificial snow cannons. There's also a 5km cross-country ski track, and plenty of areas for snowboarding.

Pamporovo (p156) likewise is experiencing rapid expansion. It's sited at 1650m, with 25km of trails and is said to be the sunniest resort in the country. It's an attractive, family-friendly place and great for beginners. The more experienced will be drawn towards the giant slalom run and, most difficult of all, the infamous 1100m-long Wall. The 'town' itself, though, such as it is, is pretty bland. Nearby Chepelare (p155) is quieter, but it has 30km of cross-country tracks and some of the longest runs in Bulgaria. The Mechi Chal 1 (3150m) is a black level run used for international competitions while Mechi Chal 2 (5250m) is a combined red/green slope. Both of these resorts are to be linked up into the vast Perelik project, creating one vast ski centre with 28km of new trails. It is due to open by December 2008.

Bulgaria's oldest resort, Borovets (p120) was founded in 1896 and although the infrastructure at present doesn't compare with nearby Bansko, it has 45km of trails and has a well-regarded ski school. In 2007, the go-ahead was finally given for the highly controversial 'Super Borovets' ski development, planned as part of Bulgaria's unsuccessful attempt to stage the 2014 Winter Olympic Games. This enormous project will turn a large swath of the countryside into a year-round tourist resort, with numerous other activities as well as skiing on offer, including golf courses and swimming pools. The mega resort will have 33 runs and 60km of tracks. It is expected to take around 15 years to complete.

Just 10km from Sofia, Vitosha (p109) is a convenient destination for weekending city folk and has slopes to suit all levels of skiers and snowboarders. Other, smaller (and cheaper) ski resorts include the new centre at Momchilovtsi (p158), Govedartsi (p122) and Maliovitza (p122), which are mainly patronised by Bulgarian holidaymakers.

The **Bulgarian Extreme & Freestyle Skiing Association** (www.befsa.com) organises events such as the annual Big Mountain competition at Bansko. It also offers freestyle skiing excursions to remote, undeveloped locations if you want to escape the crowds.

BIRD-WATCHING, BOTANY & BEARS

Bulgaria is a haven for all kinds of wildlife, including such elusive creatures as brown bears and wolves, plus 400 species of birds (around 75% of the European total). Bird-watching is a popular hobby and several companies run bird-watching tours. The nesting period (May to June) and migration period (September to October) are the best times to come. The Via Pontica, which passes over Bulgaria, is one of Europe's major migratory routes for birds, while Atanasovsko Lake, north of Burgas, is the country's most important reserve, frequented by 314 different species.

Neophron (☎ 052-650 230; www.neophron.com; PO Box 492, Varna) runs 10- to 14-day guided birding trips across the country, which can be combined with botany and bear-watching tours. It's run by professional ornithologists, and raises funds for the **Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds** (www.bsppb.org).

Birdwatching Bulgaria (☎ 02-400 1055; www.birdwatchingbulgaria.com) runs numerous birding trips throughout the year, headed by professional, English-speaking guides. For those with minimal time, the one-day trip around Sofia (€80) takes in Vitosha Nature Park (p109) and/or Dragoman Marsh, some 35km west of the capital, where possible sightings include ferruginous ducks, sedge

See www.bulgariaski.com for comprehensive information about the country's skiing resorts and snow reports.

Based in Sofia, Spatia Wildlife (www.spatiawildlife.com) runs specialised botany and dragonfly-spotting tours around Bulgaria.

Visit www.cometobg.com for details about wildlife photography tours around Bulgaria run by the knowledgeable Emil Enchev.

warblers and black woodpeckers. More dedicated bird-watchers can book onto longer tours, such as the eight-day Southern Bulgaria tour (€680 per person full board, for a group of two) where you'll have the chance to spot rarer species including the Squacco heron and Imperial eagle. The company also offers bear-watching tours and specialised excursions concentrating on botany; see the website for the full list of options.

Also worth a look is **Pelican Lake Guesthouse** (www.srebarnabirding.com) near Lake Srebarna (p274), where you'll find Bulgaria's only breeding colony of Dalmatian Pelicans. The British owners will be happy to arrange tours.

WATER SPORTS

The big Black Sea package resorts such as Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag), Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) and Albena offer all the usual organised watery fun, with numerous outlets offering jet-skiing, water-skiing, parasailing and windsurfing along the beaches. Often these are quite casual affairs set up at various points along the shoreline. Albena (p249) probably has the most comprehensive setup.

There's a growing number of diving outlets along the coast, and most are in the big resorts, although a major new complex is currently being planned near Tsarevo. As well as standard training courses and boat dives, there's also the opportunity to explore some WWII wrecks off Kaliakra Cape.

Harry's Diving Center (☎ 052-321 766; todorharbaliev@hotmail.com) in Golden Sands (p248) is a PADI-certified outfit offering reef dives offshore and wreck dives off Kaliakra Cape.

Albena Diving Centre (☎ 0888980409; ☎ 9am-6pm), based at Hotel Laguna Beach in Albena (p250), offers a similar setup, with similar prices.

Angel Divers (Map p230; ☎ 0889427355; www.angel-divers.com), with kiosks at Nesebâr harbour and on Sveti Vlas beach, runs (amongst other things) four-day PADI-certified open-water courses and wreck-diving trips off Sozopol.

CYCLING & MOTORBIKING

Though not advisable as a means of getting around cities, cycling is an excellent way of exploring some of the more off-the-beaten-track areas of Bulgaria's wild and wonderful countryside. Hostels sometimes offer bike rental to guests, but there are surprisingly few businesses that rent out bikes – the Black Sea coast resorts are probably the best places for this – so it's a good idea to either bring your own, or book onto a guided tour.

Motorroads (off Map p84; ☎ 0885370298; www.motorroads.com; Mladost 2, bl 279, office 1, Sofia 1799) in Sofia has a good choice of motorcycles for rent from €40 per day (plus €300 security deposit) and organises a series of motorbike trips: a quick three-day riding tour of the Rila, Pirin and Rodopi Mountains costs €460 per person for two, including accommodation, or €270 for a self-guided trip.

Odyssea-In (Map p88; ☎ 02-989 0538; www.odyssea-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stamboliyski 20-V, Sofia) runs eight-day mountain-biking trips through the Rodopis, covering around 50km per day (€590 per person, groups of six to nine).

Cycling Bulgaria (☎ 02-400 1080; www.cyclingbulgaria.com) is another big outfit offering interesting excursions such as the eight-day Monastery Cycling Tour (€415) taking in some of Bulgaria's smaller monasteries.

Cross the Line (Map p88; ☎ 02-987 9089; www.crossthelinebg.com; ul Tsar Samuil 38, Sofia) offers guided cycling trips and many other activities. Its seven-day Black Sea Coast trip, running from Balchik to Sozopol, costs €499 per person (includes transport and full-board accommodation). Hiking, climbing, canyoning and other outdoor trips are also available.

Visit www.vierpfoten.org, the website of the Four Paws Foundation, for news of the Dancing Bear Park in Belitsa.

HORSE RIDING

Seeing the open countryside from atop a horse can be a magical experience, and there are several companies around the country offering horse-riding tours in some of the most spectacular areas such as the Balkan range, the Pirin Mountains and the Black Sea coast. One of the most comprehensive companies is **Horse Riding Bulgaria** (☎ 02-400 3095; www.horseridingbulgaria.com), which runs an array of adventures including eight-day treks in the Western Balkan range, based around Koprivshtitsa (p191) for €695 per person, and around Strandzha Nature Park (p227) for €750.

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