

Southern Bulgaria



With spectacular and infinitely varied nature just waiting to be explored, and some of Bulgaria's greatest spiritual and cultural attractions, the south is a truly fascinating region that should be placed high on the itinerary of every traveller. From the stunning Rila Monastery and the fabled Seven Rila Lakes, strung out like jewels in the mountains beyond it, to the dynamic cultural capital of Plovdiv, southern Bulgaria offers something for everyone. Its striking landscapes range from the sandstone 'pyramids' of Melnik, where you can sample the country's best wine in splendid serenity, to the rugged Pirin Mountains and the gentler Rodopi range, together home of Bulgaria's best ski resorts.

The legacy of southern Bulgaria's colourful and complex history of ancient civilisations – from the mysterious Thracians and the Macedonians to Romans, Slavs, Byzantines and Turks – is also abundantly evident, in Plovdiv's grand Roman amphitheatre, the enthralling medieval monastery of Bachkovo, numerous Ottoman mosques and other sites attesting to a glorious past.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Hit the powder**
Ski Bansko (p127) and Borovets (p120), Bulgaria's baddest winter resorts
- **Liquid pleasure**
Sample Bulgaria's best wine beneath sandstone cliffs in little Melnik (p134)
- **Get some action**
Dive in to Plovdiv's Bohemian old town and partake in its vibrant nightlife (p138)
- **Marvel and repent**
Make a pilgrimage to the spellbinding monasteries of Rila (p117) and Bachkovo (p153), and consider their vivid frescoes of eternal damnation
- **Indolent enjoyment**
Cleanse yourself with the spa waters and massage therapies of the Devin spa resort (p160), deep in the rolling Rodopi Mountains



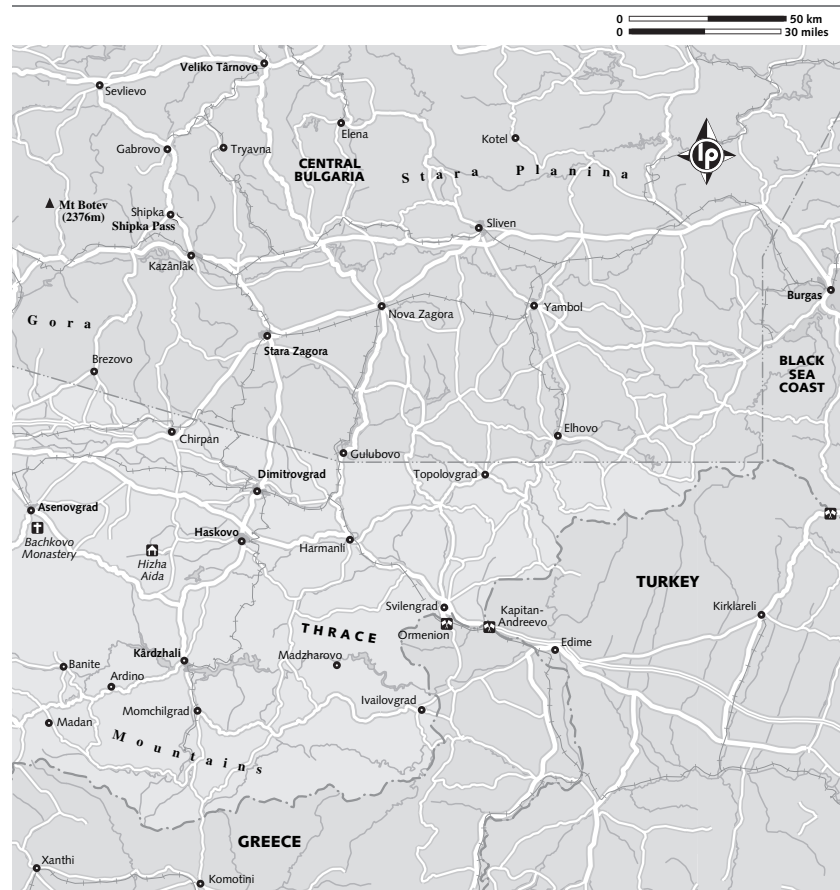


HISTORY

The vastness of southern Bulgaria and its mountainous geography have graced it with great historical diversity. It was the stomping ground of the ancient Thracians, an enigmatic, warlike group of tribes that left no written records in their own language, but once dominated large parts of modern-day Bulgaria, northeastern Greece and today's European Turkey. Thracian customs and beliefs have been passed down to us in Greek, and indeed their mystery religion, which found its supreme expression at the Temple of the Great Gods on the Greek island of Samothraki, influenced antique religion, attracting initiates even from Macedonian and Egyptian royalty.

Today's 'Bulgarian Thrace' – the section between the Sredna Gora Mountains, the Rodopi Mountains and the Black Sea coast – was the birthplace of the legendary Spartacus, the slave leader, and Orpheus, the tragic, semimythical inventor of music. Some two-thirds of the historical Thrace lie in Bulgaria, with Greek and Turkey splitting the remainder. Although the Thracians have long died out, there is a certain proud, earthy toughness common to the differing inhabitants of these three parts of Thrace that might, just perhaps, express the spirit of that long-lost civilisation.

In the deep south of Bulgaria, the sparsely populated Rodopi Mountains, dotted with



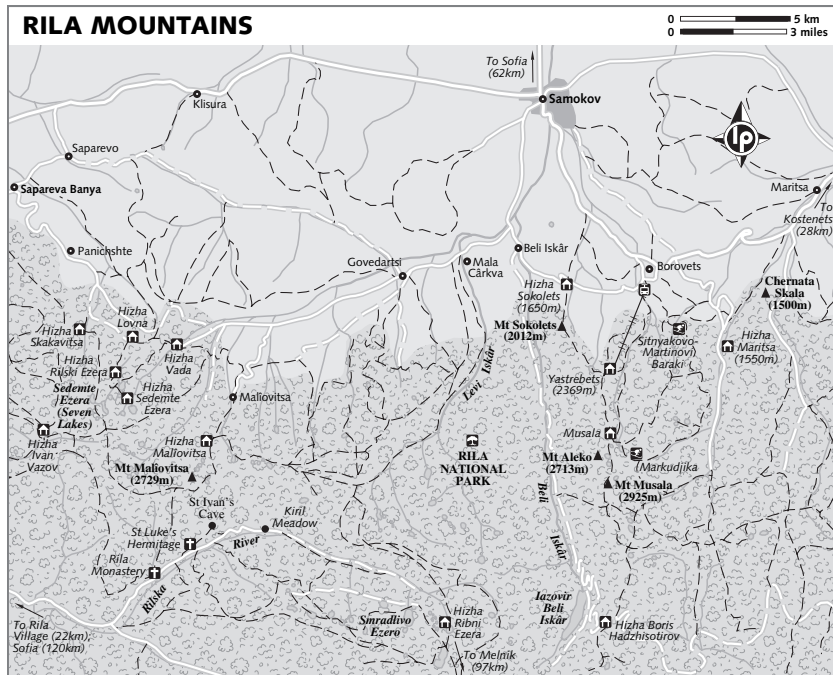
tiny, unvisited villages, attest to the more recent Ottoman legacy. The Muslim populations of Turks and Pomaks (Bulgarian Slavs who converted to Islam to win special benefits during Ottoman times) are evidenced here by minarets that pierce the boundless sky in villages unchanged over the centuries.

On the other side, in the western region of Pirin, towns such as Sandanski and Gotse Delchev preserve the names of heroic revolutionaries who fought against the Ottomans at the turn of the 19th century to free Macedonia from Turkish oppression. The issue of the similarities and differences of Bulgarian and Macedonian national iden-

ties and history remain controversial topics to this day, something you may experience while travelling in this region.

RILA MOUNTAINS РИЛА ПЛАНИНА

'Mountains of Water' was the ancient Thracian name for this compact, majestic set of peaks covering 2629 sq km – a reference to the 180 lakes, streams and springs gushing with pure alpine aqua. These waters give the range famous attractions such as the small but stunning **Sedemte Ezera (Seven Lakes)**, and entice hikers and day-tripping travellers



from Sofia. A hiking trail from the lakes also leads to Bulgaria's most important religious shrine, the captivating Rila Monastery, which draws throngs of devout Bulgarians and curious foreigners to gaze upon its dramatic architecture and vivid, wall-to-wall frescoes and icons.

The Rila Mountains also include Bulgaria's biggest ski resorts, Bansko and Borovets, and new access roads that will substantially reduce the driving time to Sofia are sure to expedite their expansion. Now increasingly popular for skiing (and partying) with foreign groups from Britain, Israel, Russia and beyond, these resorts are growing at the expense of the natural environment; lovers of untouched natural beauty are encouraged to come before Bulgaria catches up with more developed winter resort countries.

Despite the inevitable incursions of modern development, the permanently open **Rila National Park** (www.rilationalpark.org) remains a sanctuary for wildlife and flora, comprising 144 sq km of forest and 130 sq km of alpine pastures. Its fir trees, beechwoods and other conifers provide a peaceful habitat for deer,

wild goats, eagles, falcons and more. Mount Musala (2925m), near Borovets, is Bulgaria's (and the Balkans') highest peak, and offers excellent hiking. Mountain huts (*hizas*) provide simple accommodation (from about 10 lv per person), sometimes serving meals (though do bring extra food).

Invaluable printed resources for hikers include Julian Perry's *The Mountains of Bulgaria*, which details an extensive north-south trek (part of the trans-European E4 trek) across the Rila Mountains. It starts at Klisura and finishes at Hizha Predel, near Razlog, and takes from seven to 10 days. For serious hiking, you'll need Kartografia's *Rila* map (1:55,000), with place names in Cyrillic.

RILA VILLAGE РИЛА

The jumping-off point for Bulgaria's most sacred Orthodox shrine, this village 22km east of Rila Monastery is a sleepy place that just keeps up a pulse with its small faculty of tourism. Most monastery-bound buses connect here, however, and Rila does offer more inexpensive accommodation options than the monastery, as well as several

foreign exchange offices and ATMs. Along with a BulBank ATM machine near the bus station, there's an OBB Bank ATM between the village supermarket and Kafe Djoana, a sort of landmark on the corner of pl Vazhrajane and facing you when entering Rila from the west.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Orbita (☎ 07054-2167; s/d 25/40 lv; (P) (W)) The remodelled rooms here are basic but clean and contain good-sized bathrooms. It's reasonably good value, with a passable restaurant and not nearly as glum as the communist-era façade and lobby would seem to indicate. To find Hotel Orbita go to the right of the square past the OBB Bank ATM and walk about 30m.

Kafe-restaurant Boyka Lazarova (☎ 0885628401; ul Doktor Spas Stoychev; mains 3-5 lv; (M) 7.30am-midnight) Better eating, however, is actually found in a rudimentary café amusingly set in a time-worn school (now housing the tourism faculty). It serves inexpensive salads and grills in a pop-music environment. To get there, take the uphill street on the left of the square (when you're facing Kafe Djoana), proceed about 100m and turn left up the narrow stairway at the school. It's inside the building, straight ahead.

Kafe Djoana (pl Vazhrajane 2; (M) 7am-1am) A small, bright place on the square, good for an evening drink, and attracting a young local crowd.

Getting There & Away

From Dupnitsa, buses serve Rila village at 10am, 11am and 4pm. From Rila village, they depart for Dupnitsa at 6.20am, 8.40am and 3pm. Hourly buses between Rila village and Blagoevgrad operate between 6.20am and 7pm (1.50 lv, 45 minutes), and buses to Sofia leave at 6.20am and 3.30pm.

Buses leave Rila village for the monastery at 7.40am, 12.40pm and 3.50pm and return at 9am, 3pm and 5pm (1.30 lv).

RILA MONASTERY

☎ 07054 / elevation 1147m

Bulgaria's largest and most renowned monastery emerges abruptly out of a forested valley in the Rila Mountains. It's a major attraction for both Bulgarian pilgrims and foreign tourists. On summer weekends, the hordes descend and parking can be tough. In the

low season, however, the monastery provides much more solitude. Staying over at a nearby hotel or camping ground, or even at the monastery itself, allows you to experience Rila's photogenic early mornings and late evenings. You can also hike in the surrounding mountains (see p119).

Rila Monastery was founded in AD 927 by Ivan Rilski, leader of a monastic colony of hermits. Originally built 3km to the northeast, it was moved to its current location in 1335. By the 14th century's end, Rila Monastery was a powerful feudal fiefdom and, while plundered early in the 15th century, was restored in 1469, after Rilski's sacred relics were returned from Veliko Tarnovo. The monastery helped preserve Bulgarian culture and religion during the Ottoman centuries, despite being destroyed by them often over the years.

An accident, however, caused Rila's greatest modern catastrophe: a fire in 1833 nearly engulfed all of the monastery's buildings. So many donations were received afterwards from various patrons that rebuilding commenced within a year – clearly indicating the monastery's importance and reverence to Bulgarians. It was proclaimed a national museum in 1961 by the communist government, and made a Unesco World Heritage site in 1983.

Monastery Grounds

The monastery compound, open from about 6am to 10pm, includes a main church and two museums, guest rooms and a post office. Photos are prohibited inside the church but are allowed elsewhere. Souvenir shops selling religious paraphernalia and Rila holy water are also enclosed within the monastery's high walls.

Cars and buses usually park near the western Dupnitsa gate. The eastern entrance is known as the Samokov gate. Some historical details in English, French and German fill notice boards at both entrances.

Within the monastery's walls, four levels of colourful balconies – with monastic cells, storerooms, a refectory and kitchen – surround the large courtyard, where stands the magnificent **Church of Rozhdestvo Bogorodichno** (Church of the Nativity). Bulgaria's grandest monastery church. Built between 1834 and 1837, the structure is crowned by three great domes. Its outside walls are covered with frescoes both vivid and harrowing (or humorous, depending

on your disposition), depicting hell, where demons with whips, chains and pitchforks torture sinners in various states of woe and undress. The happier paintings, depicting the virtuous accompanied by angels and saints, indicate the moral lesson that stern church fathers wished to impart. The celebrated Zahari Zograf, most eminent of the many painters involved, signed his work. The gilded and intricately carved wood iconostasis was created by master artisans from Samokov and Bansko.

Considering the fierceness of the church's caretaker, it's best to take the prohibitions against skimpy clothing seriously. Long shorts are fine, but more revealing attire is forbidden. Luckily, a few sporting green tunics lie at the ready, helping you conceal whatever amount of nudity you choose to bring onto the premises. Photography, prohibited inside the church itself, is allowed outside, meaning you can snap away at the devilish frescoes and church architecture without fear.

After the church, see the **museum** (admission 8lv; ☎ 8am-5pm), in the compound's southeastern corner. Its collected 18th- and 19th-century ecclesiastical paraphernalia, prints and Bibles are punctuated by the astonishing **Rila Cross**, a double-sided crucifix carved over a 12-year period by a certain Brother Raphael, between 1790 and 1802. It's incised in miniature with 140 biblical scenes and inscriptions, and about 650 human figures. Not surprisingly, Raphael eventually ended up beatifically blind after so much staring through a magnifying glass. To protect visitors from the same fate the monastery also exhibits blown-up photos of the cross, revealing just how detailed this work is. Despite the numerous foreign visitors, however, the labelling is in Bulgarian only (the available English-language booklet will help).

Beside the Samokov gate in the northeast of the monastic compound is the **Ethnographic Museum** (admission 8lv; ☎ 8am-5pm), displaying regional folk costumes, textiles and crafts. Again, labelling is in Bulgarian only.

Other sites include the 23m-high stone **Hreliova Tower** (1335), named after a significant benefactor. The only part of the monastery remaining from that time, it's close to the Samokov gate. The monastery's **kitchen**, built in 1816, is at courtyard level in the northern wing. The 22m-high chimney, caked with centuries' worth of soot, cuts through all storeys, with 10 rows of arches crowned by a small dome. Thousands of

pilgrims were once fed here simultaneously, with food prepared in giant cauldrons – one of which could fit an entire cow.

Finally, walk up to the **upper balcony** for outstanding views of the surrounding Rila Mountains.

Sleeping

Most accommodation is within 100m of the Samokov gate. The monastery also provides relatively spartan accommodation for those desiring the full Rila experience. Rila village (p117) and Kiril Meadow (opposite) provide alternative accommodation options.

Zodiak Camping (☎ 2291; camping sites per person 10lv, s/d bungalows 15/25lv) A run-down camping ground with an idyllic setting along the river, 1.6km past the monastery along the road to Kiril Meadow, the Zodiak also offers a good restaurant.

Hotel Rilets (☎ 2106; fax 3363; s/d incl breakfast from 25/33lv; 📺) The large and outdated Rilets has many rooms; the renovated ones are worth the higher price (singles/doubles 35/45lv). You'll probably want private transportation, however, as the hotel's down a 500m-long access road starting 1.2km past the monastery, on the road to Kiril Meadow. There's an average, on-site restaurant.

Rila Monastery (☎ 2208; r per person 30lv) Rooms in the older western wing have three or four beds, and are sparsely furnished but clean. The communal facilities have toilets, but no showers. The nicer new rooms include bathrooms with showers. In summer, the latter rooms can be booked by midday, so call ahead or arrive early. The reception office (in the southern wing) handles bookings.

Hotel Tsarev Vrah (☎ /fax 2280; s/d with bathroom 40/60lv) The renovated Tsarev Vrah has decent rooms; most balconies offer forest views, and from some you can see the monastery. It's signposted about 150m from Samokov gate.

Eating

Most restaurants are near the Samokov gate. Rila's local delicacy is *pasturvka* (trout); menu prices are usually per 100g.

Restaurant Drushlyavitsa (☎ 0888278756; mains 3-12lv; ☎ 8am-10pm) Outside the Samokov gate, this fine place has outdoor tables overlooking a little brook, and serves traditional Bulgarian cuisine.

Rila Restaurant (☎ 0488-90 418; mains 5-12lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) The Rila offers similar fare

to Drushlyavitsa, but is more atmospheric, set in a 120-year-old building.

The popular little **bakery** (☎ dawn-dusk), next to the Rila Restaurant, sells hot, deep-fried doughnuts, bread and all-natural sheep's-milk yoghurt.

Getting There & Away

The most common starting points for trips to Rila Monastery are Sofia and the town of Blagoevgrad, administrative capital of southwestern (Pirin) Bulgaria (see p127). In Sofia, you can ask at the **Ovcha Kupel bus station** (☎ 02-955 5362) about direct buses, though it's more likely you'll need to connect in Rila village first. The same is true for journeys from Blagoevgrad.

Buses leave Rila village for the monastery at 7.40am, 12.40pm and 3.50pm and return at 9am, 3pm and 5pm. (In summer, the 3pm service may continue to Sofia, but not always.) From Dupnitsa, buses to Rila Monastery leave at 6.40am and 2.15pm and return from the monastery at 9.40am and 5.15pm.

A day trip from Sofia by bus involves taking any bus leaving before 8am to Dupnitsa (1½ hours) from the central bus station or Ovcha Kupel bus station. Then take the 10am or 11am bus to Rila village, and from there the 12.40pm bus to the monastery. You'll then return on the 5.15pm bus to Dupnitsa, and from there take one of the hourly buses (or trains) back to Sofia.

Buses to Rila village from Blagoevgrad run four or five times daily, the last leaving at 8pm. A day trip to the monastery from Blagoevgrad is also possible, though again you'll have to start early.

If you really need to accelerate things, take a taxi from Rila village to the monastery (about 15lv). Rila village has several taxis, and usually one or two wait at the monastery.

Full-day tours of Rila Monastery from Sofia cost from around €60 to €70 per person for a group of two people, or less for larger groups (see p97). The resort hotels at Bansko and Borovets also offer organised day trips to the monastery, among other places, though prices fluctuate considerably.

AROUND RILA MONASTERY St Luke's Hermitage & St Ivan's Cave

About 3.7km northeast of Rila Monastery, on the road to Kiril Meadow, a left-hand trail leads to St Luke's Hermitage; look for Sveti

Ivan's picture by the steps. Built in 1798, the hermitage features a large courtyard and the **Church of Sveti Luka**. Take the trail for about 15 minutes to St Ivan's Cave, where Ivan Rilski lived and is buried. Legend states that anyone able to pass through the aperture in the cave's roof has not sinned; the generous size of the hole would seem to indicate that gluttony is the only significant one of the seven deadly sins.

Kiril Meadow Кирилова Ливада

Continue 7km northeast of Rila Monastery to reach Kiril Meadow, a gorgeous area with pine trees, picnic spots, cafés and stunning views of the craggy cliffs. It's an easy, and mostly shady, walk, and there's a **guesthouse** (☎ 076-3268; r 25lv, bungalows 50lv) offering simple rooms with shared bathrooms, and bungalows with five beds and a private bathroom. It's an excellent alternative for those seeking spiritual reflection amidst tranquil nature rather than at the busy monastery.

SAMOKOV CAMOKOB

☎ 0722 / pop 27,503

You have to pass Samokov, 62km southeast of Sofia, to reach Borovets ski resort, and indeed most of the locals employed at Borovets do seem to live here. It's a small and somewhat gritty town, with history but few sites, though the Borovets expansion projects will bring Samokov closer to the action and, hopefully, smarten it up a bit.

In the 14th century, Samokov became a centre for iron mining. Five centuries later, the Samokov School of Icon Painting and Woodcarving brought the town cultural fame; soon thereafter it became known for some eccentric political ideas when the local council established the famous but ultimately unsuccessful Samokov Commune (1910-12). As Bulgaria's first socialist organisation, the commune sought to improve workers' rights and education.

Samokov's foreign exchange offices are near the bus station, which contains food, and even clothing shops.

Sights

Near the bus station is the **Bairakli Mosque** (admission 1lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Tue-Fri), built in the 1840s. It doesn't function, but does have some wonderfully ornate murals, and an unusually cut minaret.

The **History Museum** (☎ 22 194; ul Liubcho Baramov 4; admission 2 lv; 🕒 8am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri) contains archaeological and ethnographical displays, models of engines and furnaces, displays on the town's icon-painting heritage and the printing press that produced Samokov's first Bulgarian-language magazines in 1844. The upstairs photo gallery is devoted to the old town and 19th- and early-20th-century family photos. It's a few metres west of the square.

The **Sarafska Käshta Museum** (☎ 22 221; ul Knyaz Dondukov 11; admission 1 lv; 🕒 9am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Fri), 200m north of the History Museum, dates from 1860 and contains period furnishings.

Sleeping & Eating

Samokov's proximity to Borovets means hotel prices in winter are approximately 25% higher than those given here. The hotels also have restaurants.

Hotel Koala (☎ 350 783; ul Hristo Zagrafski 25; s/d/tr 15/22/32 lv; 📞) This small place on a side street 1km northeast of the bus station has six large, bright and well-furnished rooms.

Hotel-Restaurant Sonata (☎ 27 534; ul Petär Beron 4; s/d/tr 36/48/60 lv; 📞) A fairly new and central hotel with clean, cosy rooms that include TVs and fridges, the Sonata offers additional half- and full-board options (10 lv or 20 lv extra). The hotel runs guided fishing and biking trips, rents bikes and contains a children's playground.

Mehana Golyamata Cheshma (☎ 66 617; ul Türgovska; mains 6–10 lv; 🕒 10am–1am Mon–Sat) Near the bus station, this place serves salads, grills and fish dishes. It's named after the adjacent 17th-century drinking fountain.

Getting There & Away

Buses and minibuses to Samokov (4 lv, one hour) depart every 30 minutes between 7am and 7.30pm from Sofia's Yug bus station. From the **Samokov bus station** (☎ 66 540; ul Türgovska), minibuses serve Borovets (1.20 lv, 20 minutes), Govedartsi and Maliovitza. Buses to Dupnitsa (3.50 lv, one hour) leave at 7.30am, 2.20pm and 5pm.

BOROVETS БОРОВЕЦ

☎ 07503 / elevation 1350m

Although it's been overtaken by Bansko for the title of Bulgaria's biggest ski resort, Borovets still draws big crowds (both locals and foreign package tourists), and is con-

tending to reclaim its old position with the so-called 'Super Borovets' project planning to expand it significantly.

Borovets is one of Bulgaria's oldest ski resorts, as the slightly faded and worn state of the structures and lifts attests. However, unlike built-up Bansko, a town of 10,000 people, Borovets is simply a resort; most accommodation and services literally spill off the mountain. Out of ski season, when the shuttered restaurants offer only last season's chalk-scrawled menus out front, it can feel eerily empty. However, the thick pine forests all around are excellent for summer hikes, and the mountain air is very crisp and refreshing.

Information

Borovets' hotels spread over several kilometres of the main resort; however, the following year-round places all occupy the small, curving main street, which starts from the Samokov–Kostenets road and ends at the mountain's base. There's no real tourist information office, so get information about hiking, guided tours and other activities through the big hotels or ski shops.

Foreign exchange offices and ATMs exist in central Borovets. The larger hotels also have lobby ATMs and wireless internet.

Bulgariaski.com has information on snow conditions, accommodation and news at all of Bulgaria's ski resorts; the **Bulgarian Extreme & Freestyle Skiing Association** (www.befsa.com) lists organised competitions, demonstrations and excursions in Borovets and elsewhere.

Activities

SKIING

Only 70km from Sofia, Borovets sits under Mt Musala (2925m). It has twice hosted World Cup Alpine ski rounds, and usually gets about 1.5m of snow in winter. The 45km of ski runs, which include Bulgaria's longest, occupy the main areas of Markudjika, Yastrebets and Sitnyakovo–Martinovi Baraki. The four cross-country trails total about 19km, and start about 2km from Borovets.

Borovets is too far for a day trip from Sofia by bus; however, this will change when the Sofia–Borovets direct highway, which will cut travel time to 35 minutes, is completed. While nearby Samokov (p119), Govedartsi (p122) and Maliovitza (p122) offer more budget accommodation than Borovets itself,

TOP PICKS: SKI RESORTS

- Bansko (p127)
- Borovets (opposite)
- Pamporovo (p156)
- Chepelare (p155)
- Maliovitza (p122)

prices rise everywhere during winter. Shops rent ski equipment, from 50 lv to 60 lv per day. Well-qualified, multilingual instructors provide training for 300 lv (four hours per day for six days, including a lift pass and ski gear). Guests at the big hotels can get cheaper training from in-house instructors.

Borovets has three chairlifts, 10 draglifts and a gondola from the Borosports complex in Borovets to Yastrebets, costing 10/15 lv one way/return. A one-day lift pass costs 60 lv. With one, you can board a minibus to the slopes for free from the main hotels. Borovets also has decent snowboarding, with gear going for about 50 lv per day. Lessons cost about 120 lv for six hours.

HIKING

Borovets is an ideal base for eastern Rila Mountain hiking. Trails are marked, and some simply follow established ski runs – good news since the hiking trails around Borovets are not marked on Kartografia's *Rila* map.

Some short and popular hikes are:

Borovets–Chernata Skala Take the road towards Kostenets, and follow the signs pointing south to Hizha Maritsa; three hours (easy).

Borovets–Hizha Maritsa From the Borovets to Chernata Skala road, continue along the southern road; 4½ hours (moderately difficult).

Borovets–Hizha Sokolets Follow the road through Borovets – 2½ hours (easy). Another trail (1½ hours) from Hizha Sokolets heads south to Mt Sokolets (2021m).

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Horse riding is available in summer from outside the Hotel Rila, and costs around 40 lv for two hours, while **Hotel Samokov** (☎ 2581; www.samokov.com) has an indoor **swimming pool** (admission 4 lv), bowling alley and fitness centre, and offers saunas and massages. These facilities are open daily in winter, and on weekends in summer.

The major hotels all offer **excursions** to places such as Plovdiv, Sofia and Rila Monastery (at varying prices).

Sleeping

Independent travellers planning to ski (and sleep in) Borovets should book three to six months ahead for midrange or top-end hotels. The low-season rates listed here increase by 25% in winter. Borovets' streets are unnamed and few, so addresses don't really exist. For cheaper accommodation, try Samokov (opposite), Govedartsi (p122) and Maliovitza (p123).

Flora Hotel (☎ 2520; hotel-flora@gbs-bg.com; s/d/stc from 60/80/75 lv; 📞 🕒 📺 📺) After some recent revitalisation, the now four-star Flora boasts a swimming pool, spa and 'Irish pub'. It's a more intimate alternative to the behemoth Rila and Samokov, while boasting similar amenities. Rooms are plain but clean, with balconies, and the restaurant's fine.

Alpin Hotel (☎ 32 201; www.alpin-hotel.bg; d/q 67/80 lv; 📞 🕒 📺 📺) On the mountain's base opposite Hotel Rila, this nice modern place has small but comfortable rooms with all the mod cons, and a sparkling lobby bar.

Hotel Rila (☎ 2441; www.borovets-bg.com; s/d/apt 90/120/160 lv; 📞 🕒 📺 📺) The gigantic Rila, opposite the mountain near the main road's upper end, has impressive facilities such as a fitness centre, tennis court, two restaurants, shops and a nightclub. The slightly worn rooms were once very modern but even now are just fine. Upper-floor rooms facing the mountain offer wonderful views from their balconies. While you wouldn't usually expect skiers to be packing heat, the Rila takes no chances with its prowling team of surly, black-clad armed guards, menacingly noticeable when guests are fewer out of season.

Hotel Samokov (☎ 2581; www.samokov.com; s/d/stc from 90/120/220 lv; 📞 🕒 📺 📺) Halfway down the main road from the restaurant, the gargantuan Samokov has three restaurants, a nightclub, shopping centre, gym, bowling alley and ski school. The comfortable modern rooms have balconies, but are even more characterless than the Rila's.

Villa Stresov (☎ 02-980 4292; www.villastresov.com; d from €100, whole villa from €480; 📞 🕒 📺) This large, Swiss-style villa has four double rooms, sleeping up to eight people, a fully fitted kitchen, a garden and all the mod cons. Rent it all, or just pay for one, two or three bedrooms. There's a two-night minimum stay.

Eating

Borovets' main streets feature cafés, bars and restaurants heavy on 'English steaks' and cocktails reminiscent of gauche seaside summer holidays. Without the package tourists after winter, however, most close.

La Bomba (☎ 483; mains 5-9 lv; ☎ 8am-1am) Opposite the Hotel Rila, La Bomba serves pizzas and steak-and-chips style dishes.

Black Tiger (☎ 0898580483; mains 6-9 lv; ☎ 9am-1am) A simple place playing punchy Bulgarian music, the Black Tiger goes for the well-lacquered ski lodge look, and is popular with locals even out of high season, serving good *mehana* (tavern) fare. It's behind La Bomba on the mountain's base.

Alpin Restaurant (mains 8-12 lv) The Alpin Hotel's (p121) restaurant offers a varied, if touristy, menu of pizzas, grills and barbecue meals.

Getting There & Away

There's not (yet) direct public transport between Sofia and Borovets, but that will probably change with the Sofia-Borovets road's completion. For now, take a bus from Sofia to Samokov (4 lv, one hour) and then a minibus to Borovets (1.20 lv, 20 minutes). Minibuses from Samokov leave every 30 to 45 minutes between 7am and 7pm. Borovets has no bus station; minibuses from Samokov stop outside Borovets' Hotel Samokov.

Alternatively, if you're coming on a long-haul bus passing by Borovets, such as the Blagoevgrad-Plovdiv service, the driver may leave you on the side of the road; from here, it's a 1km uphill walk into town.

Taxis are a good option for out-of-town travel; note, however, that taxi rides within Borovets itself during ski season start at a staggering 10 lv (for out-of-town journeys, normal rates always apply).

Borovets has several taxi companies; a good bet is **Boro Taxi** (☎ 0888707785), led by the affable Slaveyko Spasov, who speaks English, German and Russian, and who bears an uncanny resemblance to American comic actor Leslie Nielsen. Examples of his base fares from Borovets include: Samokov (10 lv); Maliovitza (30 lv); Dupnitsa (50 lv); Sofia (70 lv); Septembri (50 lv); and Plovdiv (100 lv). An international trip west to the first town in Macedonia (Kriva Palanka) also costs 100 lv – worth men-

tioning, since travelling this relatively short distance via public transportation would require at least four different buses and most of a day.

GOVEDARTSI ГОВЕДАРЦИ

☎ 07125 / elevation 1200m

Govedartsi, 13km southwest of Samokov, is an alternative, and cheaper base to Borovets for local hiking, or for skiing at Borovets. It's also where the marked trails listed in Kartografia's *Rila* map start.

Number 53 Hotel (kokojambazki@hotmail.com; d with shared bathroom 20 lv) has large, airy and bright rooms, with a garden, sauna, bar and restaurant. It's 300m east of the bus stop on the Samokov-Maliovitza road.

Kalina Hotel (☎ 2643; kalina-hotel@top.bg; s/d 20/40 lv), 150m up from the town square and bus stop, offers small but comfortable rooms. There's a restaurant-bar and garden barbecue. The friendly owners love discussing local history and folklore.

From Samokov, six or seven daily minibuses serve Govedartsi (2 lv, 20 minutes).

MALIOVITSA МАЛЪОВИЦА

elevation 1750m

At the foot of the Rila Mountains 13km southwest of Govedartsi, little Maliovitza (Mali-ov-itsa) is a more low-key ski resort than Borovets (though this will change someday as Borovets continues to expand and encroach). It's also a popular summertime base for rock climbing, mountain climbing and hiking, with rich bird life. Day trips from Sofia require private transport, so if you're bussing it from there you'll probably be sleeping over.

Activities

SKIING

Skiing in Maliovitza is cheaper than at Borovets, but not nearly as challenging. The **Central Mountain School** (☎ 07125-2270) rents equipment for 5 lv to 8 lv per person per day depending on quality. Other local shops charge about 15 lv per day. The village's one draglift costs 8 lv per person per day.

CLIMBING & WATER SPORTS

In summer, the Central Mountain School offers **rock climbing** and **mountain climbing** activi-

THE WHITE BROTHERHOOD

This exotic Bulgarian cult, also known as Dunovism (after the priest who started it in 1918), follows an eclectic set of rituals such as yoga, sun-worshipping and vegetarianism, amalgamating Orthodox Christianity and Hinduism, among other religions. Followers meet at the Seven Rila Lakes each August; check with the Odyssea-In Travel Agency (p86) or the National Tourist Information Centre (p86) in Sofia for the exact dates. Note that cult members often fill up the Hizha Sedemte Ezera and Hizha Rilski Ezera huts for a week or more in August for their inscrutable evening rituals, though the unwashed masses can still enter the huts during daylight hours to witness the pilgrimage.

ties for about 30 lv to 50 lv per person per day, including a guide, but not transport or equipment (they're available at the school).

Between March and June, and in September and October, the Central Mountain School runs **kayaking** and **rafting** trips on local rivers.

HIKING

Hiking from Maliovitza involves a network of *hizhas* that lead to and from what seem to be foreign visitors' favourite southwestern natural attraction, the **Seven Rila Lakes** (*Sedemte Rilski Ezera*). These glittering turquoise lakes, small but exquisitely beautiful, are strung out like jewels across rolling meadows in the central Rila Mountains. While Maliovitza's hiking trails heading there are well-marked, consider buying Kartografia's detailed *Rila* map.

Reaching the lakes, and their *hizha* accommodation, is done in various ways. From Maliovitza, first hike (about one hour) to **Hizha Maliovitza** (2050m). The barracks-like rooms have between four and 20 beds, and there's cheap camping as well. The café has basic meals, or, bring your own food and use the kitchen.

From Hizha Maliovitza, it's a seven-hour hike to Hizha Sedemte Ezera, an older hut with simple dormitories. Alternatively, a little further north you'll find **Hizha Rilski Ezera** (☎ 0701-50 513), up at 2150m. The Rila Mountains' best *hizha*, it offers dorm beds

and rooms with a shared/private bathroom from around 30/35 lv per person, including breakfast and dinner, plus a café. Reservations aren't necessary, except during August's grand convocation of the mystical White Brotherhood (see the boxed text, left).

From the Seven Lakes, it's an easy, downhill one-hour walk to **Hizha Skakavitsa** (☎ 0701-50 513) at 1985m, and its lovely waterfall; alternatively, head for the Rila Monastery (a six- to seven-hour hike).

Another route to the Seven Rila Lakes from Maliovitza is via Hizha Vada and Hizha Lovna, bypassing Hizha Maliovitza.

Alternatively, reach the lakes from **Sapareva Banya** (take a bus from Dupnitsa), further to the west, or from Hizha Pionerska (1500m). To reach this hut from Sapareva Banya, walk 13km up the steep road, hire a taxi (best done from Dupnitsa), or organise a transfer (about 30/35 lv for one/two people) with Sofia-based **Zig Zag Holidays** (p86). From the hut, it's a three-hour hike to Hizha Rilski Ezera.

Sleeping & Eating

Guesthouse Dzhambazki (☎ 07125-2361; info@house-djambazki.com; s/d/apt from 12/24/44 lv; ☎) This cosy place has comfortable rooms, some with balconies, plus a sauna and bike rental.

Hotel Maliovitza (☎/fax 07125-2222; d/tr/q incl breakfast from 20/30/40 lv; ☎) This large hotel above the central car park has rooms nicer than the hotel's façade and corridors might suggest, plus a restaurant, bar, ski school and kids' playground.

Central Mountain School (☎ 07125-2270; d from 25 lv; ☎) Located near the central car park, the school offers basic accommodation and a restaurant.

Getting There & Away

In Sofia, call the **Yug bus station** (p105) to see if the daily, direct 9am minibus to Maliovitza (6 lv, two hours) is running. Alternatively, catch a bus to Samokov and get a minibus to Maliovitza (3 lv, 45 minutes) at 8.15am or 4.15pm. Minibuses return to Samokov at 9am and 5pm, and (theoretically) to Sofia at about midday. From Blagoevgrad, take a regular bus passing through Samokov and then catch the Maliovitza minibus from there.

PIRIN MOUNTAINS

ПИРИН ПЛАНИНА

The stark Pirin Mountains, with peaks surpassing 2900m, rise dramatically out of Bulgaria's southwestern corner; their dark, portentous appearance has affected human imagination since well before the ancient Slavic tribes named the mountains after their god of thunder and storms, Perun. Over the centuries, these mountains and their life-giving waters – some 230 springs and 186 lakes – have attracted Macedonians, Greeks, Slavs and Turks, among others. While their average height is relatively low, at 1033m, over 100 Pirin peaks exceed 2000m, and 12 are higher than 2700m. The highest, Mt Vihren (2915m), is near Bansko.

Some 40,447 hectares of the Pirin range constitute the **Pirin National Park** (www.pirin-np.com in Bulgarian), Bulgaria's largest, permanently open and free to enter. The gate is only 1.8km southwest of Bansko, the country's premier ski resort. The park's been a Unesco World Heritage site since 1983, protecting a varied and unique landscape, home to 1100 species of flora, 102 types of birds and 42 species of mammals, such as bears, deer and wild goats. The Bansko-based **Pirin National Park office** (☎/fax 07443-2428; ul Bulgaria 4) offers key information for longer hikes in the mountains.

Besides skiing at Bansko and hiking in the national park, visitors to the Pirin region can enjoy some of Bulgaria's best wine at the offbeat village of Melnik, clustered with 18th- and 19th-century houses, or take in the waters at mineral baths near Sandanski, legendary birthplace of Roman slave revolt leader Spartacus, and even indulge in some nightlife at Pirin's provincial capital and a major university town, Blagoevgrad.

BLAGOEVRAD БЛАГОЕВГРАД

☎ 073 / поп 69,572

About 100km straight south of Sofia, Blagoevgrad (Bla-go-*ev*grad) is more than just the Pirin region's administrative capital; it's a friendly, liveable place filled with grand squares, vibrant cafés and clubs frequented by 16,000 Bulgarian (and foreign) young people studying at the **Neofit**

Rilski Southwest University (☎ 827 177) and the **American University of Bulgaria** (☎ 825 241; www.aubg.bg). On the road between Sandanski and Sofia, Blagoevgrad makes a useful base for day trips or longer forays to places such as Rila Monastery, Bansko, Sandanski and Melnik. It's also a stop on the Sofia–Thessaloniki–Athens international train line.

Known in Ottoman times as Gorna Dzhumaya, the city's large Turkish population was displaced after the Balkan Wars of 1912–13. It was renamed Blagoevgrad by the communists in 1950, after the 19th-century Bulgarian Marxist, Dimitar Blagoev, whose statue stands on the square near the American university.

Orientation

Blagoevgrad's adjacent train station and two bus stations are on Sveti Dimitar Solunski, about 2km from the centre (taxis costs around 3 lv).

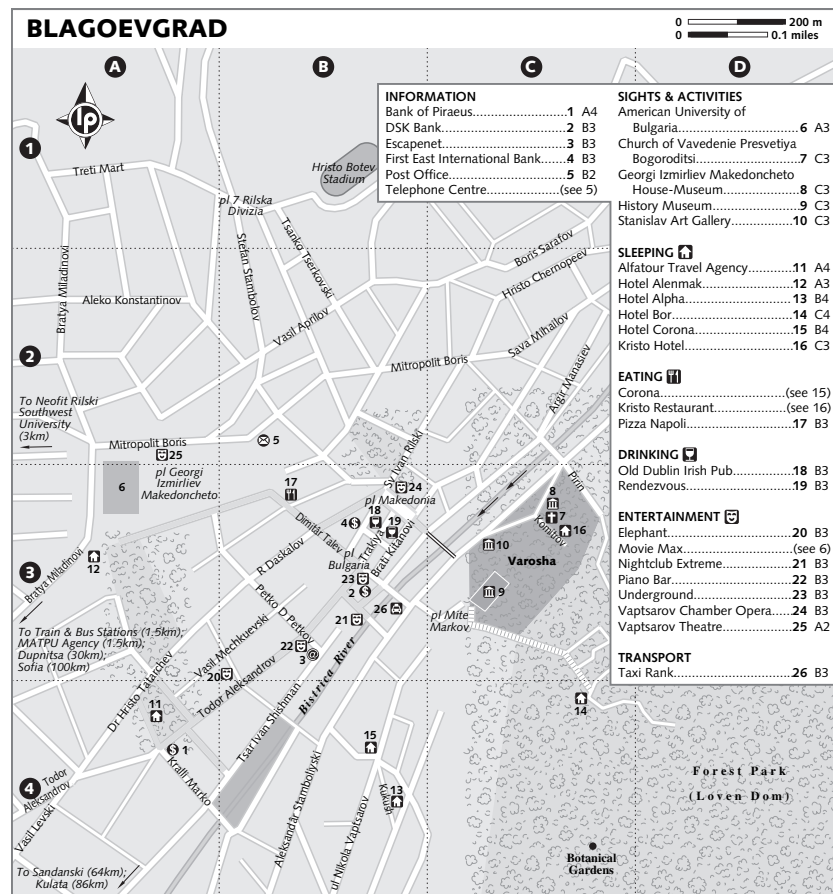
East of the small river bisecting Blagoevgrad is Varosha, the old quarter; behind and to the southeast are a forested park and botanical gardens. Most of the action, however, is on the river's western side, around three large and pedestrianised adjoining squares, pl Bulgaria, pl Makedonia and pl Georgi Izmirliiev Makedoncheto. They contain most of the shops, cafés, restaurants and clubs. Rising from the far end of the latter square is the American University of Bulgaria, beyond an enormous fountain; at the time of writing, however, the university was preparing to move across to pl Bulgaria. The state university, Neofit Rilski Southwest University (known to students simply by the Bulgarian-language name, *Yugozapaden*) is 3km west of the centre.

Information

Foreign exchange offices line ul Tsar Ivan Shishman, hugging the river on the western bank. A First East International Bank stands on a laneway southwest of pl Makedonia, while the Bank of Piraeus is on the corner of pedestrianised ul Todor Aleksandrov and ul Kralli Marko. There's also a DSK Bank ATM on pl Bulgaria, next to the popular Underground nightclub.

Escapenet (☎ 0899879042; ul Petko Petkov 2; per hr 1 lv; ☎ 10.30am–10.30pm Mon–Sat) A centrally located internet café.

Post office (ul Mitropolit Boris) Combined with the telephone centre.



Sights

The **History Museum** (☎ 823 557; bul Aleksandâr Stamboliyski; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am–noon & 3–6pm Mon–Fri), in a modern building near Varosha, exhibits roughly 160,000 religious relics, archaeological artefacts and traditional costumes, and displays on the military history of Macedonia (from the Bulgarian point of view). The natural history section contains Bulgaria's biggest stuffed bird and animal collection.

Between Forest Park and bul Aleksandâr Stamboliyski, which runs parallel to the river on its eastern bank, is the old quarter, **Varosha**. Several renovated Bulgarian National Revival-period homes, including the **Georgi Izmirliiev Makedoncheto House-Museum**, and art galleries such as the **Stanislav Art Gallery**, are

on Varosha's relaxing cobblestone streets. Opening hours are erratic, however.

In a small, serene garden under the **Kristo Hotel**, the **Church of Vavedenie Presvetiyya Bogoroditsi** (Church of the Annunciation of the Virgin; ☎ 884 795; ul Komitrov; ☎ 6.30am–8pm), built in 1844, has a richly frescoed portico and unique black-and-white chequered façade, with an extraordinary painting of the circle of life that includes continents and astrological symbols. There are also attractive murals and icons inside.

A steep road (700m) from Varosha leads to **Forest Park (Loven Dom)**, a shady and popular place with good views. Towards the park's southern edge are the small **Botanical Gardens**.

Sleeping

Alfatur Travel Agency (☎ 885 049; alfazdr@abv.bg; ul Krali Marko 4) can arrange centrally located private rooms from 20 lv per person.

Hotel Korona (☎ 831 350; www.hotel-crown.com; ul Nikola Vaptsarov 16; d/apt incl breakfast from 40/50 lv; 📺) This new place near the Hotel Alpha offers good value. The spacious, modern rooms have TV, minibar, air conditioning and double beds. There's a glossy bar and downstairs restaurant (guests get a 20% discount). Reception workers, however, don't all speak English, and though the hotel claims to have internet, no one seems to know how to make it work.

Hotel Alpha (☎ 831 122; alphablg@hotmail.com; ul Kukush 7; d/apt from 40/50 lv; 📺) Although the rooms at this established and popular place are slightly smaller and less posh than the Korona's, service is friendlier and more professional. Rooms are clean, with modern bathrooms, and the attractive lobby bar has a wireless connection.

Hotel Alenmak (☎ 884 076; pl Georgi Izmirliiev Makedoncheto; d 50 lv; 📺) At the time of writing this glum communist throwback was being reincarnated as a posh five-star hotel with spa centre. Till then, it remains an overpriced dinosaur.

Kristo Hotel (☎ 880 444; hotel_kristo@abv.bg; ul Komitrov; s/d/apt incl breakfast 50/60/70 lv; 📺) With white walls bedecked with wood-framed windows and flowering balconies, the Kristo offers plenty of old-town atmosphere. The cosy, well furnished rooms have nice views, and many have fireplaces. The hotel's *me-hana* (see right) is excellent as well. The triple combination (adjoining church, hotel, restaurant) makes the Kristo popular for weekend weddings.

Hotel Bor (☎ 884 075; fax 885 078; hotel_bor@yahoo.com; Loven Dom; d/apt 60/100 lv; 📺) In the forested hills above Varosha, this refurbished hotel offers two restaurants, indoor pool, Jacuzzi, sauna, steam bath and fitness centre. While rooms are smart, the Bor's peaceful location is its best asset. Although you can walk there in 10 minutes via a steep and winding stepped path through the woods, driving or taking a taxi over the bridge and up the winding ul Pirin (about 1km) is a better idea.

Eating

Blagoevgrad's dining is mainly to be found around the main squares or in the hotel

restaurants. The busy cafés and nightclubs are packed with Blagoevgrad's irrepressible student population.

Kristo Restaurant (☎ 880 444; ul Komitrov; mains 4-6lv) The Kristo Hotel's restaurant has outdoor seating overlooking the Church of Vavedenie Presvetiya Bogoroditsi, and serves good salads and grilled meats.

Pizza Napoli (☎ 34 649; pl Hristo Botev 4; mains 5-8 lv; 📺 8am-midnight) This place has an attractive square-side setting, and serves good pizzas, pasta and grills.

Restaurant Korona (☎ 831 350; www.hotel-crown.com; ul Nikola Vaptsarov 16; mains 2-5 lv; 📺 7am-midnight) The Hotel Korona's restaurant does good grills such as *tatarsko kioffe* (hamburger stuffed with melted cheese), though service is slow.

Drinking & Entertainment

Old Dublin Irish Pub (ul Trakiya 3; 📺 8am-2am) What a Bulgarian university town would be without an Irish pub finds no definitive answer in this big, well-furnished establishment playing techno instead of jigs and reels. Nevertheless, the Old Dublin is popular with students, and is the only place with any sort of pub ambience. It also serves good bar snacks and full meals.

Rendezvous (ul Brati Kitanovi 5; 📺 7.30am-midnight) A slick, central café for a morning coffee or evening drink.

Underground (☎ 088852578; pl Bulgaria; 📺 9pm-4am) This very popular student place serves unusual cocktails and features a dimly lit and subterranean brick-walled bar. Underground usually plays house music and R&B.

Piano Bar (☎ 0898828828; ul Petko Petkov; 📺 10pm-4am) Although the drinks are expensive at this stylish after-hours club, it's very good when live rock or jazz bands are playing.

Nightclub Extreme (☎ 832340; ul Koritarov; 📺 11pm-5am) A very popular, slightly Eurotrash, central discotheque near the river.

Elephant (☎ 0896624343; ul Pere Toshe 6; 📺 6pm-4am) Located off the pedestrianised ul Todor Aleksandrov, Elephant is a more chilled-out alternative to the club scene here, also playing house music.

For Hollywood blockbusters, visit the wide-screen **Movie Max** (American University complex, pl Georgi Izmirliiev Makedoncheto). The respected **Vaptsarov Theatre** (☎ 823 475; pl Georgi Izmirliiev Makedoncheto) and the **Vaptsarov Chamber Opera** (☎ 820 703; pl Makedonia) offer more edifying entertainment, but close during August.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the well-organised and helpful **main bus station** (☎ 884 009), known as the *tsentralna aftogara*, and from the adjacent **Chastna Aftogara** (☎ 831 132), which has buses to Sofia, Sandanski, Gotse Delchev, Petrich, Dupnitsa and Plovdiv. Ascertain which station you need when buying the ticket. The main bus station also has a **left-luggage office** (📺 6am-7pm, per bag 0.50 lv).

Buses travel hourly (6.30am to 6pm) from Blagoevgrad to Sofia (7 lv, two hours) via Dupnitsa, but more come through en route to/from Kulata or Sandanski. There are 10 daily buses to Sandanski (4 lv, 1½ hours), six to Bansko (5 lv, two hours) and one direct bus to Melnik daily at 11am (5 lv, two hours). Buses to Rila village (1.50 lv, 45 minutes) leave hourly between 7am and 8pm. Two daily buses serve Plovdiv (10 lv, three hours).

Bus 2, which stops outside the History Museum, serves the bus/train stations; alternatively, a taxi from the centre costs around 3 lv.

The **train station** (☎ 885 695) is on the line between Sofia and Kulata. From/to Sofia, there are five daily fast trains (1st/2nd class 7.10/5.70 lv, 2½ hours), and one slow train, via Dupnitsa. Three of these fast trains continue to Sandanski (1st/2nd class 4.90/3.90 lv, two hours) and Kulata (1st/2nd class 5.60/4.50 lv, 2½ hours); two continue on to Thessaloniki in Greece, leaving Blagoevgrad at 9.12am and 7.42pm (20 lv, four hours).

BANSKO БАНСКО

☎ 07443 / pop 9740 / elevation 930m

Bansko is the big daddy of Bulgarian ski resorts, continually bulldozing new trails and roads, increasing hotel occupancy, and enhancing its entertainment options; indeed, with over 100 hotels and *pensions*, the once-quiet village now has more beds than permanent residents. In winter, hordes of Brits, Russians, Israelis, Germans, Bulgarians and others bear down to ski (and party) in this sunny yet snow-filled resort. However, in summer things are quieter and you will see old women in traditional dress chatting on their doorsteps.

Built in the 10th century over an ancient Thracian settlement, Bansko became wealthy by the mid-18th century, well-positioned on the caravan route between the Aegean

coast and Danubian Europe. Eminent traders, craftsmen, icon painters and woodcarvers hailed from Bansko, as did Otets Paisii Hilendarski, the 18th-century monk who helped create Bulgarian ethnic nationalism with his literary work and travels.

Bansko's considerable ties with this past include several museums and more than 150 cultural monuments, most from the 19th-century National Revival period. These stone-and-timber houses were buttressed by fortress-style walls, with hidden escape routes, protecting their inhabitants from the rapacious Turks. As elsewhere in Bulgaria, many have been reincarnated as *mehanas* or guesthouses, and there's an old quarter with lovely (and slightly hazardous) cobblestone lanes.

Orientation

Bansko's adjacent bus and train stations are north of the centre, a 15-minute walk to the main square, pl Nikola Vaptsarov. The large ul Pirin connects this square with pl Vúzhrazhdane, dominated by the mammoth Paisii Hilendarski Monument, dedicated to the literary monk. Shops and cafés line the pedestrian mall, ul Tsar Simeon.

In winter, the action shifts away from the centre almost completely, to the area around the ski gondola and its terminus up at Baderishka Polyana. Restaurants, cafés and wintertime nightlife are concentrated near the gondola area, around the convergence of ul Pirin and ul Giorgi Nastev.

Information

Accommodation-seekers and those wanting to be informed should head to the centrally located **Tourist Information Center** (☎ 88 580; info-center@bansko.bg; pl Nikola Vaptsarov 1; 📺 9am-5pm), where the very helpful Tanya Stancheva can find accommodation for all budgets, and advise on cultural and outdoors activities. Here maps of Bansko town are sold (4 lv), with hotels, restaurants and banks listed on the front, and the Pirin National Park map on the back; the similarly priced winter map features Bansko's ski trails, gondola and lifts on the back instead.

Biochim Bank (☎ 88 387; ul Tsar Simeon 56) Bank with an ATM, across from the post office and telephone centre.

DSK Bank (☎ 88 120; ul Tsar Simeon 57) Also has an ATM. **Internet Club Zonata** (ul Bulgaria 22)



KSV Ltd (ul Tsar Simeon) Exchange office near the supermarket.

Pirin National Park Office (☎ /fax 88 202; www.pirin-np.com; ul Burgaria 4) Informs about long treks in the Pirin Mountains.

United Bulgarian Bank (ul Pirin) Next to Rodina Hotel; has an ATM and foreign currency exchange.

www.bansko.bg Official municipal website; also in English.

www.bulgariaski.com Invaluable resource on skiing in Bansko and all other Bulgarian resorts.

Sights

The **House-Museum of Nikola Vaptsarov** (☎ 8304; pl Nikola Vaptsarov; admission 3 lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-5.30pm) is where Nikola Vaptsarov (1909-42), a respected antifascist poet and activist, was born. Influenced by communist ideology while a student, his populist writings led Vaptsarov to be arrested and tortured by the wartime fascist government; he wrote his most famous poem, in fact, while awaiting execution. Period décor in the museum's rooms, plus photographs, documents and Vaptsarov's personal belongings are exhibited, while a short video, followed by an audio tape (English, French or German) provides background.

The attached **Crafts & Textile Exhibition** sells traditional arts, crafts and textiles from Bansko and the Pirin region; ask at the Vaptsarov Museum if it's not open. The adjacent **Theatre Zhelev** (admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5.45pm) contains landscape paintings by local artist Tenio Zhelev. They are for sale (but expensive).

Velyanov's House (☎ 4181; ul Velyan Ognev 5; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) features elaborately painted scenes and woodcarvings from the 'Bansko School' of carving, icon and fresco painting. The **Bansko Permanent Icon Exhibition** (☎ 88 273; ul Yane Sandanski 3; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) has more Bansko School creations. Both museums can be opened on weekends by prior arrangement.

Housed in a former schoolhouse, the **House-Museum of Neofit Rilski** (☎ 2540; admission 3 lv; ul Pirin 17; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) exhibits manuscripts by, and photos of, Rilski (1793-1881), the father of Bulgarian secular education, who created an early Bulgarian grammar textbook (1835), and a Bulgarian-Greek dictionary.

The **Sveta Troitsa Church** (pl Vúzhrazhdane; ☎ 7am-7pm), built in 1835, is surrounded by a 1m thick and 4m high stone wall. It features magnificent wooden floors and faded murals. Within its grounds stands Bansko's

major landmark: the 30m-high **clock tower**, built in 1850. Until Sofia's Alexander Nevsky Cathedral was completed in 1912, this was Bulgaria's largest church.

At the time of writing, two new museums were opening: the first, the **Historical Museum** (☎ 88 304; ul Aton 3; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm), also known as Radonova Káshta after the building in which it's housed, contains, believe it or not, finds dating back to 6000 BC, as well as antique, medieval and 19th-century National Revival-period items.

The second new museum, the **Museum of Otets Paisii Hilendarski** (☎ 88 304; ul Otets Paisii 21; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm) commemorates the life of this local monk, author and instigator of Bulgarian nationalism. The museum's chapel includes a replica of the room at the Serbian Hilendarski Monastery on Greece's Mt Athos, where Paisii wrote his seminal and fulsome narrative of the history of the Bulgarian nation.

Activities

SKIING

Nestled up at 1000m, at the base of rugged Mt Vihren (2915m), Bansko enjoys long snowy winters. With slopes ranging from 1800m to 2560m, Bansko boasts Bulgaria's most consistent skiing conditions. The snow, often 2m thick between mid-December and mid-April, sometimes lasts until mid-May. Lifts and slopes are modern and well maintained and the resort has snowmaking equipment that works at above-freezing temperatures.

Bansko also boasts a state-of-the-art gondola (carrying eight persons). The trip lasts 20 minutes and takes skiers directly from town and onto the slopes at **Baderishka Polyana**, now full of pubs, restaurants and ski schools. A second gondola, plying the same route, will open by 2009. From Baderishka Polyana, another chairlift accesses more trails at Shilgarnika, which has four chairlifts and four draglifts. Bansko has a total of seven chairlifts and 16 draglifts.

Chalin Vrag I and II are the most famous of Bansko's 15 (and counting) ski runs, which total 67km, along with 8km of cross-country trails. The total trail coverage comprises 35% for beginners, 40% for intermediates, and 25% advanced. There's no freestyle helicopter skiing at Bansko, though veering off some trails brings you into wide open, untouched mountainside

where you're essentially taking your life into your own hands. There's also a half-pipe for snowboarders.

An all-day Bansko lift pass costs 60 lv, though note prices rise each year.

Pirin Sport (☎ 8537; ul Gen St Kovachev 8) rents ski equipment (from about 45 lv per day) and snowboarding gear, and provides instructors for both sports. Similar services are provided by **Intersport** (☎ 4876; ul Pirin 71), **Alpin Hotel** (☎ 8075; ul Neofit Rilski 6) and **Hotel Bansko** (☎ 4275; bansko@bg400.bg; ul Glazne 37), among many others. Hotel Bansko and Intersport rent mountain bikes in summer.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

A fun side activity is ice skating at the new skating rink, **Ledena Parzelka** (ul Pirin; ☎ 9am-10pm, Dec-Apr), as it's known in Bulgarian. Skate rental is 5 lv; another 5 lv gets you 90 minutes of skating time. Alternatively, pay 15 lv for an all-day skating pass.

There's a hot **mineral water bath** in Dobrinishte, 6km south of Bansko, and numerous local summertime **hiking** opportunities; see the Bansko Tourist Information Center (p127) for more information.

Festivals & Events

St Theodor's Day (15 March) Celebrated with horse racing; in Dobrinishte.

Celebration of Bansko Traditions (17-24 May) Folklore, dancing and the like.

Pirin Sings Folk Festival (August) Held annually, with a larger version occurring every four years (the next is in 2009). The festival unites thousands of folk musicians and dancers from the Pirin region.

International Jazz Festival (around 7-15 August) Attracts Bulgarian and foreign artists; most events are held on an open-air stage at pl Nikola Vaptsarov and in the Theatre Zhelev.

Bansko Day (5 October)

Sleeping

Bansko has over 100 choices of accommodation, ranging from simple private rooms to five-star luxury hotels. Discreet camping is possible in the nearby Pirin National Park (p124). While most foreigners come on package tours, independent bookings are possible; the Tourist Information Center (p127), which finds rooms for all budgets, is happy to help. Book well in advance for the ski season, when rates are at least 25% higher than those listed

here (and even higher during the Christmas and New Year's holidays).

Duata Smarcha (☎ 2632; ul Velyan Ognev 2; s/d incl breakfast from 16/32 lv) The lovely garden setting of this popular *penzion* encloses a well-run, friendly place with airy rooms and traditional home-cooked meals.

Hadzhiradonova Káshta (☎ 8276; ul Buirov 7; s/d from 20/30 lv) An atmospheric house with large, traditionally furnished rooms with sheepskin bedspreads and spotless bathrooms; the Hadzhiradonova overlooks a pretty courtyard.

Alpin Hotel (☎ 8075; ul Neofit Rilski 6; s/d from 20/30 lv) The Alpin offers clean and simple rooms; less exciting than the Hadzhiradonova but also good value.

Hotel Belvedere (☎ 8083; fax 8082; ul Ivan Mihailov 28; r/40 lv; ☐) Set on a residential street in east Bansko, the Swiss-chalet style Belvedere has modern, well-maintained rooms with balconies, plus restaurant and bar.

Hotel Rodina (☎ 8106; fax 8472; ul Pirin 7; s/d/apt 50/64/120 lv) The Rodina is a cosy and central place that, despite the lacklustre lobby area, has nice if simple rooms. The hotel offers sauna and massage, plus a restaurant and tavern.

Hotel Pirin (☎ 8051; www.hotelpirin.bansko.bg; ul Tsar Simeon 68; s/d/apt incl breakfast from 60/80/100 lv; ☐) The large and slightly timeworn Pirin, opposite the post office, has smart, comfortable rooms, ample facilities and an attractive garden. Remarkably, it offers 'smoker's rooms' – so assert yourself if you'd rather not have a room smelling like stale smoke.

Hotel Glazne (☎ 88 022; www.glazne.bansko.bg; ul Panapot Hitov 2; s/d 62/84 lv) There's a certain elegance to the Glazne, on the river's western bank. Rooms are smart and well done, and the service and restaurant are excellent.

Hotel Avalon (☎ 88 399; www.avalonhotel-bulgaria.com; ul Eltepe 4; s/d/tr €36/50/60; ☐) A friendly, British-run place popular with budget travellers, the Avalon has well-done, airy rooms, some with Jacuzzi, plus a restaurant serving French and Italian fare. The owners also organise local excursions.

Kempinski Hotel Grand Arena (☎ 88 888, 88 565; www.kempinski-bansko.com; ul Pirin 96; s, d & ste from 360 lv; ☐) This global giant enjoys – but of course – a prime location, close to the gondola and winter nightlife, and boasts luxurious rooms with all expected

amenities, prompt, efficient service and excellent facilities.

Eating & Drinking

Bansko's traditional *mehanas* offer regional delicacies and excellent local wine. Some places close out of season.

Mehana Tumbeva Káshta (☎ 0899888993; ul Pirin 7; mains 3-7 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) A small and friendly bar and grill offering meat specialities and lighter fare, the Tumbeva Káshta rests in a secluded garden (the cosy interior functions in winter).

Mehana Momini Dvori (☎ 88 239; pl Nikola Vaptsarov 2; mains 4-5 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) This *mehana* overlooking pl Nikola Vaptsarov offers pizzas, salads, barbecued dishes and more, and has outdoor seating also.

Mehana Kasapinova Káshta (☎ 3500; ul Yane Sandanski 4; mains 4-10 lv; ☎ 8am-1am) Excellent local food and wine is served in a traditional setting at the Kasapinova. Nice touches include the colourful local rugs, clay pitchers of wine and a cosy fireplace.

Mehana Vodenitsata (☎ 84 019; cnr ul Hristo Botev & ul Ivan Vazov; mains 6-8 lv; ☎ 11am-midnight) A traditional Bulgarian restaurant offering hearty portions and live music, the Vodenitsata is popular with locals and visitors alike.

Happy End (☎ 11am-late) They forgot the 'ing', but never mind: this grand bar-disco, capable of containing 400 ruddy skiers for après-ski activity, is a wintertime favourite, opposite the gondola. Numerous other bars and nightclubs are in the general area as well.

Getting There & Away

From Sofia (12 lv, three hours), 15 daily buses travel to the **Bansko bus station** (☎ 88 420; ul Patriarh Evtimii), most via Blagoevgrad; from the latter to Bansko, it's 5 lv. Several more buses travelling to Gotse Delchev also stop at Bansko.

From Bansko, four or five daily buses go to Blagoevgrad, and two more depart for Plovdiv (9 lv, 3½ hours), at 7.10am and 8.20am. Between mid-June and mid-September, private minibuses (3 lv) run to Hizha Banderitsa (see Hiking in the Pirin Mountains, p133), leaving at 8.30am, 2.15pm and 5pm, and returning at 9.30am, 3pm and 6pm.

The coolest route to Bansko, however, is by train; the narrow-gauge rail route from Septemvri to Dobrinishte crosses the mountains and reaches the Bansko **train station** (☎ 8232; Akad Yordan Ivanov) in five hours (5 lv, four daily). Among the stops is Avramovo – the highest Balkan train station. Taking the leisurely, visually stunning ride to Septemvri also brings you onto the main Sofia–Plovdiv line, allowing connections to these cities and other major destinations. Four daily trains depart Bansko for Septemvri, at 6.59am, 10.14am, 3.21pm and 6.40pm. The amusingly inactive ticket office asks you to buy tickets only 10 minutes in advance of departure time.

SANDANSKI САНДАНСКИ

☎ 0746 / pop 27,390

Sandanski, 65km south of Blagoevgrad, is known to most travellers as merely the connection point for Melnik, 17km to the south-east. However, it's a likeable, laid-back place, a notable spa centre and perhaps Bulgaria's sunniest town. Like Blagoevgrad, it's on the Sofia–Thessaloniki–Athens international train line, and so its numerous restaurants, bars and clubs are popular with visitors from south of the border as well. Indeed, rather than a town of no consequence, it's a town of no consequences for the hordes of Greek sex tourists looking for something discreet and affordable on the side.

On the less lurid side, Sandanski makes a great alternative base for Pirin Mountain hikes (see p133), and has numerous wineries in the arid surrounding villages. Sandanski's curative mineral springs, useful against ills such as bronchitis and asthma, attract local and foreign visitors alike.

The Thracians first settled here, in about 2000 BC. Macedonians and Romans followed. Sandanski may have been the birthplace of Spartacus, leader of the legendary slave revolt against the Romans in Sicily in 74 BC. Almost completely destroyed in the 6th century AD by barbarians, the subsequently rebuilt Sandanski became important during the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018). Once known as Sveti Vrach, it was renamed in 1949 after Macedonian freedom fighter Yane Sandanski.

Orientation

The train station is 5km west of town. The bus station, on ul Hristo Smirnenki, is a five-minute walk from the centre. Head straight



northeast from the bus station to reach the central pl Bulgaria, or follow ul Hristo Smirnenki eastwards, through the open market, until it reaches the long east-west bul Makedonia, the main street for banks/ATMs, foreign exchange offices, shopping and cafés. Turn left here towards pl Bulgaria, site of the post office and telephone centre.

Sights & Activities

The centrally located **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 23 188; bul Makedonia 55), built over a Roman villa's remains, contains tombstones and votive tablets, plus the original villa's mosaic floor. Sandanski's apparent link to Spartacus is explained (in Bulgarian), and items from the adjacent ruins of the 5th-century **Sveta Ioanna Basilica** are also displayed. The basilica ruins themselves are small, but fun to wander around. Much less prominent **Byzantine ruins** are up on ul Mara Buneva, possibly including a baptistry, though there are no descriptions and not much is visible.

The **Sveti Georgi Church** (ul Sveti Kiril i Metodii 10; ☎ 8am-6pm), built in 1861, is Sandanski's only surviving National Revival-era church.

The large **Town Park** contains over 200 species of Mediterranean plants, surrounding **mineral baths and swimming pools** (admission 1.50 lv; ☎ 9am-7pm summer) where locals unwind, a small **lake** with paddle boats and a **Summer Theatre**. A lazy stream runs through the park, and is crossed by a rocking bridge.

Just outside of Sandanski itself, there are more mineral baths; ask at your hotel for details.

Festivals & Events

St Vasil's Day Folk Concert (1 January)

Sandanski Celebrations Thursday after Orthodox Easter Sunday.

Pirin Folk National Festival (early September)
Features dancing and music.

Young Red Wine Festival (early December) Merry festival of the grape.

Sleeping

Although **Grozdan Hotel** (☎ 32 918; ul Gotse Delchev 4; s/d/tr 25/35/50 lv) and **Rooms Niki** (☎ 0888259633; ul Gotse Delchev 4; d/tr 35/50 lv) share the same address and prices, they're independently run. Both have simple, clean and spacious rooms. However,

Grozdan has friendlier, English-speaking staff, and unlike Niki offers single rooms.

Hotel Balevurov (☎ 30 013; fax 24 024; ul Mara Buneva 14; tw/d 25/30 lv; ☎ ☎) This quiet place near the Archaeological Museum has clean rooms; twin rooms have separate, but large bathrooms.

Europas Hotel (☎ 30 166; ul 8 Mart 11; s/d 29/40 lv; ☎ ☎) A central and reasonably priced option, the Europas has snug, clean rooms; most have balconies.

Hotel Aneli (☎ 31 844; www.aneli.hit.bg; ul Gotse Delchev 1; d/apt 30/50 lv) This budget favourite is on the square; the simple, clean rooms have modern bathrooms.

Hotel Sveti Nikola (☎ 33 035; www.hotelsvetinikola.com; bul Makedonia 1; s/d/ste 58/78/136 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) The splendidly located Sveti Nikola, right on lively pl Bulgaria, borders on luxurious and has an international clientele. The comfortable rooms are complemented by the facilities (sports centre, casino, nightclub, 10m by 5m indoor pool and lobby bar), which include the inevitable Greek taverna.

Park Hotel (☎ 30 206; www.parkhotelsandanski.com; ul Hristo Smirnenki 13; s/d 74/97 lv; ☎ ☎) This new hotel on the road between the bus station and bul Makedonia is perhaps Sandanski's most elegant. The pretty and posh rooms have all the mod cons (including wireless internet), wood furniture and soft, understated décor. Service is friendly and professional, and there's both a small spa centre and a well-regarded restaurant.

HIKING IN THE PIRIN MOUNTAINS

A network of marked hiking trails (13 primary and 17 secondary) link 13 huts and shelters throughout the park. The primary trails are described and mapped in the Bulgarian Ministry of Environment's detailed map (1:55,000) in the *National Park Pirin* leaflet printed in English; get it at the **National Park Office** (☎ /fax 07443-2428; ul Bulgaria 4), or from souvenir shops.

Kartografia's widely available *Pirin* map (1:55,000) is the only accurate and detailed hiking map of the whole mountain range. The numerous marked trails delineated range from BANSKO to Melnik and Sandanski. Also, Domino's *BANSKO* map includes a small but detailed map in English of 12 hiking trails. These trails include BANSKO to **Hizha Banderitsa** (☎ 07443-8279), 2km south-west of Shilignarnika, and BANSKO to **Hizha Vihren** (☎ 07443-8279), 2km further up. Both offer convenient bases for hikes to nearby **caves** and **lakes**, such as Hizha Vihren (about three hours one way).

From Sandanski, a popular, three-hour hike leads to the glorious **Popina Lúka** region, with lakes, waterfalls and pine forests. Hikers can stay at **Hizha Kamenitsa** (☎ 0746-30 385) or **Hizha Yane Sandanski** (☎ 0746-30 385). Half-board at either costs around 25 lv. Julian Perry's *The Mountains of Bulgaria* describes a hike across the entire Pirin Mountains from Hizha Predel (at the end of the Rila Mountains hike) to Petrovo village near the Greek border. It's a tough, seven- to 10-day hike (longer if the weather is bad). You'll want to buy the above maps, not rely on the book's.

Hotel Sandanski (☎ 31 165; www.interhotel-sandanski.com; bul Makedonia; s/d/apt 110/140/220 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This 300-room giant is Sandanski's leading spa treatment centre, with hydrotherapy, weight-loss, antistress and aromatherapy programmes. There's also tennis, a *pétanque* pitch and gymnastics classes, plus restaurants, cafés, bars and a nightclub.

Eating

Aside from the hotel restaurants, eateries and cafés line bul Makedonia.

Tropikana (☎ 0898726578; bul Makedonia 73; mains 4-7 lv) Near the park entrance, the Tropikana does traditional Bulgarian dishes, and has outdoor seating.

Restaurant Surprise (☎ 31 202; bul Makedonia 63; mains 5-8 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) Right on the main strip, Surprise has a varied menu and outdoor seating.

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 22 130; ul Hristo Smirnenki) buses to Sofia (10 lv, 3½ hours, six to eight daily) travel via Blagoevgrad (4 lv, 1½ hours) and Dupnitsa. Buses go to Melnik (1.70 lv, 40 minutes), and then Rozhen, at 7.40am, 11.40am, 3.30pm and 5.30pm. They return to Sandanski at 1pm, 4pm and 5pm. Check in Melnik for times of morning buses to Sandanski. Store luggage in the ticket booth (0.50 lv per bag).

Sandanski is on the Sofia–Thessaloniki–Athens international train line. The **train station** (☎ 22 213) is 5km west of town. From Sofia, three fast trains (1st/2nd class 9/6.80 lv, 3½ hours) travel here daily via Blagoevgrad and Dupnitsa, continuing to the Greek border at Kulata. Two daily international trains leave for Thessaloniki at 10.12am and 8.42pm (15 lv, three hours).

Taxis serve Melnik, Rozhen Monastery, Kulata and other local destinations.

MELNIK МЕЛНИК

☎ 07437 / pop 240

While clever marketers aim to enhance little Melnik's charm by calling it 'Bulgaria's smallest town', it's actually just a tiny, though

very appealing village tucked beneath sandstone cliffs, and cluttered with white National Revival–era stone houses with overhanging, Macedonian-style wood balconies. Melnik has historically been a centre of wine production, and here you can sample some of Bulgaria's best and most unique wines, and tour house-museums where the village's vintners once lived. For more information on local wineries, see p68 and opposite.

About 20km north of the Greek border, Melnik is also notable for its unusual environmental surroundings. The yellow-white mixture of clay and sand in the surrounding hills has, over the centuries, eroded into bizarre formations, resembling pyramids and giant mushrooms. Melnik's also a good base

for exploring the southern Pirin Mountains (see the boxed text, p133) and, though seeing its main attractions requires one day, you may well enjoy lingering on in Melnik's lazy sunshine and quietude, as there are nice places to stay and eat. There are no banks or ATMs, however.

History

The Melnik area was first settled by the Thracian Medi tribe, to which the legendary Spartacus belonged. It was later settled by Romans, then by proto-Bulgarians between the 7th and 9th centuries AD. The name Melnik probably comes from the Old Slavonic *mel*, 'sandy chalk', abundant in the surrounding cliffs.

In the early 13th century, Melnik fell under the rule of Despot Alexei Slav, who ran a personal fiefdom from here, while building several monasteries and a large fortress (some remains survive). Melnik became an educational and cultural centre, and its jewellery, woodcarving and ceramics were famous throughout Europe, while Melnik's celebrated red wine was traded as far away as modern-day Croatia and Venice.

Although Melnik declined after the 14th-century Ottoman invasion, it prospered during the Bulgarian National Revival period in the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Many traditional houses were built, often over ruined Roman and medieval homes. Until a century ago, Melnik was a thriving commercial centre with some 20,000 inhabitants, but with the 1912–13 Balkan Wars, it was largely burned and the town's Greek population was forcibly removed by the Greek army. Since then, Melnik has been significantly restored and rebuilt.

Orientation & Information

Melnik's bus stop, along the main east–west road connecting it with Sandanski and Rozhen Monastery, is on the village's western edge, opposite the municipal building. The two main streets run east–west along both sides of the Melnishka River's often-dry tributary. Walking paths and goat tracks run parallel to the valley, leading to the homes and ruins. Drivers should park off the main road and walk into Melnik.

Paradoxically, Melnik's increasing tourism means services for locals have declined.

With house prices skyrocketing, and very few children still being raised here, Melnik's old schoolhouse was put up for sale, and even the doctor's office and pharmacy have closed. Melnik has neither internet café nor ATMs. Only the **post office** (☎ 7.30am–noon & 1–4.30pm) lingers on.

On a happier note, a tourist information office (dubbed 'Euro-Information Center') was to open at the time of writing, and be based in the municipality building opposite the bus stop, where the informative cultural organisation *Leb i Vino* (see the boxed text, p136) also dwells.

Sights & Activities

WINERIES

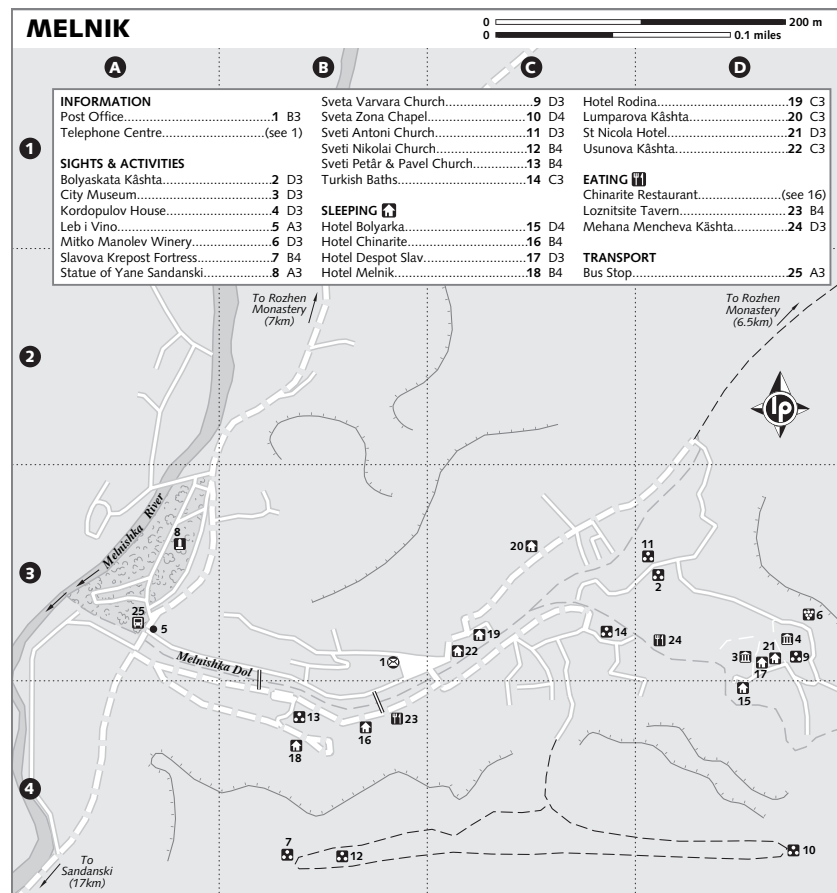
Melnik's wines have been celebrated for over 600 years. The locally grown grapes produce a superb dark red wine, known as the Shiroka Mehichka Loza and widely sold. Shops and stands dot Melnik's cobblestone paths, with bottles of quality reds and whites going for 1 lv to 4 lv and up.

To participate, visit the numerous hotels and restaurants that advertise wine tasting. Unfortunately, some old favourites have closed, so for the most atmospheric adventure in *degustatsia* (wine tasting), clamber up the hillside to the **Mitko Manolev Winery** (☎ 0887545795; ☎ 9am–midnight). Also known as *Mitko Sheshtaka* ('the Six-Fingered') it's basically a cellar dug into the rocks, and an informal hut with tables and chairs outside, for sampling (and buying) both red and white wine. It's along the hillside trail between the Bolyaskata Käshta ruins and the Kordopulov House. There are certainly worse things than whiling away the hours in the sunshine with a glass of Melnik red, and the views of the town and cliffs from up here are wonderful as well.

MUSEUMS

Melnik's grand old houses, many jutting out from cliffs, feature handsome wood balconies and spacious upper quarters, with cool stone basements for wine storage. Officially, all buildings here must be built and/or renovated in the Bulgarian National Revival-period style, and painted brown and white.

According to the proud caretaker, it's the Balkans' biggest house-museum; in any case, the **Kordopulov House** (☎ 265; admission 2 lv; ☎ 8am–8pm), built in 1754 and former home of one of Melnik's foremost wine merchants,



IN SEARCH OF SONG

If you've been hunting for a place that allows you to dive into traditional Bulgarian culture, then look no further than Melnik. Run by the husband-and-wife team of Yane Kamenarov and Elena Georgieva-Kamenarova, *Leb i Vino* ('Bread and Wine') is a cultural organisation that aims to celebrate the musical and cultural heritage of the Pirin region. Through visiting local villages and interacting with sagacious elders, Yane and Elena have collected the knowledge and artistry of everything from singing and wool dyeing to instrument making and carpet weaving.

While their primary goal is to keep traditional Pirin culture alive and to transmit it to future generations, they also provide lessons and tours so visitors can enjoy a unique and intimate experience of, as Elena says, 'the real traditions that are slowly disappearing' as the modern world continues to encroach on rural Bulgarian life.

The lessons and trips offered by *Leb i Vino* are varied and flexible. For example, someone interested in learning to weave traditional blankets might spend some hours at the loom with Eleni, and then visit a village to see it done for real; likewise with a *gayda* (Balkan bagpipe) lesson from Yane.

While prices fluctuate depending on the activities, weaving, dyeing, or tambura or *gayda* lessons cost around 50 lv per hour, while a full 'folklore programme' involving exhibitions of traditional dances, songs and costumes costs 150 lv per hour.

Yane and Elena have an informative English-language website (www.lebivino.com) and can be contacted through it or by phone (☎ 0887803143). Their shop, signposted as 'Folklore Art Center', is in the municipality building opposite the bus stop, and is generally open from 7am to 10pm, unless they're in the villages.

is a truly impressive structure. The lovely sitting rooms have been carefully restored, and boast 19th-century murals, stained-glass windows and exquisite carved wooden ceilings, plus couches along the walls, bedecked with colourful pillows.

Downstairs, the house's enormous wine cellar includes 180m of illuminated, labyrinthine passageways. It's fun to explore; look out at the end for the wall full of glittering coins, which well-wishers have managed to stick into the soft cave surface – a gesture of goodwill and hope that the crops will be good and the rains will fall. If you share these sentiments, stick a stotinka of your own into the wall. You can taste, and buy, the house wine here. The Kordopulov House is the four-storey building on the cliff face at the street's end, south of the creek.

Not always open and without many attractions, the **City Museum** (☎ 229; admission by donation; 🕒 9am–7pm Mon–Fri) features local traditional costumes, ceramics and jewellery. The early-20th-century photos of old Melnik are fascinating. The museum is signposted before the Hotel Despot Slav.

RUINS

The 10th-century **Bolyaskata Káshta**, one of Bulgaria's oldest homes, is ruined except for some partially standing walls. You can peer

into it and also enjoy the great views. Nearby is the ruined 19th-century **Sveti Antoni Church** (also not signposted).

At its peak, Melnik had around 70 churches; only 40, mostly ruined ones survive. A signposted path opposite the Hotel Rodina leads to the ruined **Sveti Nikolai Church** (1756), and to the ruins of Despot Slav's **Slavova Krepost Fortress**. Both are visible from the Bolyaskata Káshta ruins, or from near the Lumarova Káshta Hotel. The trail then heads east along the ridge about 300m to the ruined **Sveta Zona Chapel**.

The **Turkish Baths**, easy to miss and difficult to recognise, are just before the Mehana Mencheva Káshta tavern. **Sveti Petâr & Pavel Church**, built in 1840, is down from the Hotel Melnik's car park. Just below the Kordopulov House, the 15th-century **Sveta Varvara Church** has retained its walls and floor, and displays icons where visitors light candles.

To visit the closed churches, find caretaker Yancho, usually at Sveti Nikolai Church.

Festivals & Events

First among Melnik's wine-making festivities is the **Trifon Zarezan Festival** (1 February), dedicated to Sveti Trifon, patron saint of the vine. Events also occur during grape-picking season (first two weeks of October). There's also a **folklore festival** on 1 April.

Finally, the cultural organisation **Leb i Vino** (see the boxed text, opposite) offers lessons in traditional Pirin crafts, singing and instrumental playing, which can involve trips to unvisited villages where these still-living traditions can be experienced in 'raw' form.

Sleeping

Private rooms cost around 15 lv to 20 lv per person; all are clean but with shared bathrooms. English-language 'Rooms to Sleep' signs are prominent.

Hotel Rodina (☎ 08869472020; s/d/ste 15/30/45 lv) North of the creek bed, the Rodina has clean and modern rooms, though not the town's most atmospheric. It's good value, however, and has a restaurant.

Lumarova Káshta (☎ 0888804512; r per person 20 lv; 📍) Behind the village, the cosy rooms here have balconies with fantastic views, and attractive décor and beds. There's traditional food and wine tasting, too. It's up a steep path starting behind Usunova Káshta.

Usunova Káshta (☎ 270; s/d incl breakfast 20/40 lv) The well restored Usunova, once an Ottoman prison, now has a happier function. Kindly old Ivan Usunov, who was born here, inherited the house from his grandfather. He can open the restaurant, but only for groups of 10 or more. The simple but well maintained rooms are ensconced within the hotel's central courtyard and are painted a dazzling white.

Hotel Melnik (☎ 272; d/apt 30/100 lv; 📍) A huge and slightly dated, faux-traditional place high up, the Melnik offers great views. It's a bit musty, though the rooms are fine, and come with TV and fridge.

Hotel Despot Slav (☎ /fax 248; s/d/tr incl breakfast 40/50/60 lv) One of Melnik's nicest and most traditional places, the Despot Slav is on Melnik's far end and has large, handsome rooms with lovely furnishings. The attached *mehana* is similarly atmospheric.

Hotel Chinarite (☎ 0887992191; www.varvarabg.com; s/d 40/60 lv) This small hotel, known for its adjoining restaurant (see right), offers clean, modern rooms and has friendly staff. Wine tastings are held in the small wine cellar adjoining the restaurant.

St Nicola Hotel (☎ 286; stnicola@datacom.bg; d/apt from 40/90 lv; 📍) Just above the Despot Slav, the St Nicola offers excellent value. Rooms are large, cheery and tastefully furnished, and the apartment has a sun terrace, lounge,

kitchen and big bathroom. There's a tasty restaurant, serving the famous house wine. Ask (politely) for laundry service.

Hotel Bolyarka (☎ 383; www.bolyarka.hit.bg; d/apt 60/80 lv; 📍) One of Melnik's finest hotels, this new place opposite the Hotel Despot Slav has gracious and helpful owners, who run an excellent on-site restaurant. Rooms are cheerful and well decorated; the apartments include a fireplace.

Eating

Most of Melnik's best eating (all around 6 lv to 10 lv for main courses) is at hotel restaurants: the Mehana Despot Slav has traditional décor and hearty portions, while the St Nicola Hotel's restaurant above it offers a cosy setting and food fuelled by its famous wine. The Hotel Bolyarka Tavern has a lovely stone-and-wood traditional interior, plus a summer garden. It serves traditional Melnik *banitsa* (a flaky cheese pasty), part of a lengthy menu including roast lamb and pork specialities.

Chinarite Restaurant (☎ 0887992191; mains 5–8 lv) and **Loznitsite Tavern** (☎ 283; mains 5–8 lv) are next door to each other midway up the main road, by the bridge. The former also serves homemade Melnik *banitsa* and has a small wine cellar for tasting, while the latter has an inviting, vine-covered outdoor setting, and good Bulgarian fare.

Mehana Mencheva Káshta (☎ 339; mains 6–11 lv; 🕒 10am–11.30pm) This tiny tavern, popular with locals, serves authentic Bulgarian dishes and fresh local specialities such as river trout.

Getting There & Away

Bus schedules between Melnik and Sofia are unpredictable. One daily bus usually leaves Melnik for Sofia (10 lv, four hours) at 6am and returns to Melnik from Sofia at about 10am. A bus to Blagoevgrad (5 lv, two hours) leaves at 4pm. Buses from Sandanski (p133) to Melnik, continuing another 7km to Rozhen, leave Melnik at 8.16am, 12.21pm and 4.06pm, and return from Rozhen at 9am, 1.10pm and 7.27pm. Melnik has no taxis.

ROZHEN MONASTERY

The **Rozhen Monastery** (admission free; 🕒 7am–7pm), also known as the Birth of Virgin Mary Monastery, stands 7km north of Melnik and was originally built in 1217. Rebuilt in the late 16th century, it was destroyed by the Turks soon after. Today's monastery, mostly built

between 1732 and the end of the 18th century, has also undergone significant modern renovations. Photography and video cameras are prohibited inside the monastery.

The **Nativity of the Virgin Church**, originally built in 1600, contains wonderful stained-glass windows, 200-year-old murals, wood-carvings and iconostases. Murals also occupy the 2nd-floor **refectory**. The monastery enjoys a great setting over Melnik's unique cliffs, and has a vine-covered courtyard.

About 200m before the monastery car park is the (closed) **Sveti Kiril & Metodii Church**; in front of it is the grave of Yane Sandanski (1872–1915), one of the most important Macedonian revolutionary leaders. The locally popular **Rozhen Fair** of traditional culture is held on 8 September.

Hotel Rozhena (☎ 07437-211; s/d incl breakfast 30/40lv; P) has simple but comfortable rooms with TV and bathroom, and more luxurious double apartments. A sauna and gym are available, and there's a restaurant.

There are *mehanas* near the bus stop. The café by the monastery car park sells drinks and snacks.

Getting There & Away

It's 7.2km from Melnik to the monastery, including the steep 800m uphill bit from Rozhen village. Buses from Sandanski to Melnik continue to Rozhen village. Alternatively, hike (6.5km) from Melnik up the track by the Bolyaskata Käshta ruins along the creek bed, then look for the English-language signs. The trail has no shade so, in summer, avoid mid-day walking and take water.

BULGARIAN THRACE

The vast territory of the ancient Thracian tribes, now encompassed by modern Bulgaria, Greece and Turkey, is still a wild, sparsely populated region of varied and dramatic landscapes and remote villages. However, its one major urban centre, Plovdiv, is Bulgaria's second-biggest – and arguably its best – city, and an important transport hub. Just south of it, striking Bachkovo Monastery lies among wooded hills and vineyards (for more information on local wineries, see p67). The largely unvisited east has a marked Turkish influence, and is Bulgaria's main tobacco-growing country; however, tourism here remains largely undeveloped.

PLOVDIV ПЛОВДИВ

☎ 032 / pop 346,760

With its innumerable art galleries, winding cobbled streets and bohemian cafés, it would be no exaggeration to call today's Plovdiv (*Plov-div*) the Paris of the Balkans. Bulgaria's second city equals Sofia in things cultural and is a determined rival in nightlife as well. Being a smaller and less stressful city than Sofia, Plovdiv is also great for walking, offering most of the capital's amenities without its traffic or crime. Plovdiv is also a major university town, something that enhances its lively, exuberant spirit and guarantees great nightlife.

Plovdiv's appeal derives first from its lovely old town, the *Starriot Grad*, largely restored to its mid-19th-century appearance and full of winding cobblestone streets. It's literally packed with atmospheric house-museums and art galleries and, unlike many other cities with 'old towns', has eminent artists still living and working within its tranquil confines. The old town also boasts Thracian, Roman, Byzantine and Bulgarian antiquities, the most impressive being the Roman amphitheatres – the best preserved in the Balkans, and still used for thrilling performances.

Plovdiv's modern centre, sprawling below the old town, features a shop-lined pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Aleksandär, which leads to a splendid square with gushing fountain. The nearby Tsar Simeon Garden is a shady, popular spot for relaxing. Plovdiv's cafés and bars are widespread, though one concentration of popular places is found in the Kapana district, northwest of the old town.

Plovdiv's always been one of Bulgaria's wealthiest and most cosmopolitan cities, and it's also Bulgaria's second-largest road and railway hub and economic centre. Although often used by travellers merely as a stopover between Bulgaria and Greece or Turkey, Plovdiv repays a longer visit and will certainly draw you in if you let it.

History

The ubiquitous Thracians settled Plovdiv around 5000 BC. Their fortress, at Nebet Tepe in the old town, was called Eumolpias. Philip II of Macedon (father of Alexander the Great) extended the settlement, humbly naming it Philipopolis in 342 BC. He re-fortified the existing Thracian fortress, making Philipopolis an important military centre. However, the

city whose ruins remain today was only created after AD 46, when the Romans arrived, building streets, towers and aqueducts for the new city, Trimontium. Unfortunately, Goths and Huns plundered and destroyed it in the mid-3rd century and in AD 447 respectively, and Trimontium languished. The proto-Bulgar Khan Krum seized it in 815 and renamed it Pupulden, making it an important strategic outpost of the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018).

Pupulden, or Philipopolis as the Byzantines called it, was controlled by Constantinople, Bulgars and even Latin Crusaders over the following centuries. The Ottomans conquered in 1365, rebuilding and renaming the city Filibe (a bastardisation of the Greek name, Philipopolis). The city thrived during Turkish rule and its merchants grew wealthy. Some of Bulgaria's finest and most lavish townhouses were built here during the Bulgarian National Revival period. In 1855, Hristo Danov founded Bulgaria's first publishing house in Plovdiv.

Shockingly, the 1878 Congress of Berlin that followed the Russo-Turkish War decreed that Plovdiv would remain Ottoman, as capital of the Eastern Rumelia province, while most of Bulgaria was freed. Only in 1885 did Plovdiv join the state – missing its likely opportunity to become Bulgaria's capital.

Plovdiv today is a centre of business and regional transport, with its international trade fairs (held since the late 19th century) being among the Balkans' biggest.

Orientation

Plovdiv's central train station, Rodopi bus station and main Yug bus station are all adjacent on the southern side of town. From here, several broad streets radiate northwards, including bul Ruski and ul Ivan Vazov, which runs towards the city's main square, pl Tsentralen. Plovdiv's main pedestrianised thoroughfare, ul Knyaz Aleksandär, runs north from here to pl Dzhumaya, and the enormous Dzhumaya Mosque, continuing north to the Maritsa River as ul Rayko Daskalov. Plovdiv's centre is south of the river; modern (and expensive) suburbs lie to the north. The old town is east of major thoroughfare bul Tsar Boris Obeditel, which runs north–south over the river, partially through a tunnel dug under the old town.

Like Rome, Plovdiv boasts seven hills, though one was flattened during the com-

munist era and only four are impressive: Nebet Tepe, with ruins of a Thracian fort, and standing above the old town; Sahat Tepe (Clock Hill), crowned with a clock tower; Bunardjika (the 'Hill of the Liberators') to the west; and Djendem ('Hill of the Youth') in the southwest.

Although central bookstalls and bookshops sell city maps such as Domino's *Plovdiv* (1:11,500), free maps from hotels, hostels and the tourist information centre should suffice.

Information

BOOKSHOPS

Litera (Map p142; ☎ 625 300; ul Tsaribrod 1; ☎ 8.30am–8.30pm Mon–Fri, 10am–7pm Sat & Sun) A bookshop opposite the Dzhumaya Mosque; has English-language travel books about Bulgaria, including a few Lonely Planet guides.

INTERNET ACCESS

Internet centres around pedestrianised ul Knyaz Aleksandär are open 24 hours and charge from 1 lv to 2 lv per hour.

Internet Café Speed (Map p142; 2nd fl, bul Maria Luisa 1)

Internet Fantasy (Map p142; ul Knyaz Aleksandär 31)
Zeon Internet Cafe (Map p142; pl 19 Novemvri; ☎ 24hr)

MEDICAL SERVICES

Klinika Medicus Alpha (Map p140; ☎ 634 463; www.medicusalpha.com; ul Veliko Tarnovo 21; ☎ 24hr) A modern medical centre with many different specialists.

Polyclinic DKC 4 (off Map p140; ☎ 0888566478; ul Gergana 7) Friendly, British-trained GP Dr Plamen Todorov speaks excellent English and comes highly recommended by local expats. He provides basic medical examinations (15 lv) and can order blood tests, write prescriptions and refer you to specialists if necessary. Call in advance for an appointment.

MONEY

Foreign exchange offices line ul Knyaz Aleksandär and ul Ivan Vazov. Several exchange offices will also change travellers cheques, and some give credit card cash advances. Most close on Sunday, and rates vary. ATMs are found widely, with many around pl Dzhumaya and ul Knyaz Aleksandär, though not in the old town's upper reaches.

POST

Main post office (Map p140; pl Tsentralen)

TELEPHONE

Telephone centre (Map p140; pl Tsentralen; ☎ 6am–11pm) Inside the post office.



INFORMATION		Hotel Maritsa.....11 C1	ENTERTAINMENT 🎪
Greek Consulate.....1 B4	Hotel Nord.....12 C1	Flamingo Cinema.....23 A3	Luki Cinema.....24 B4
Klinika Medicus Alpha.....2 C5	Noviz Hotel.....13 B3	Nai Club.....25 A5	Open-Air Theatre.....26 A4
Main Post Office.....3 C5	Novotel.....14 B1	Palmitte.....27 B5	Plovdiv Opera House.....28 B5
Telephone Centre.....(see 3)	Trakiya Hotel.....15 B6		
Tourist Information Center.....4 C5	Trimontium Princess Hotel.....16 C5		
Turkish Consulate.....5 B5			
SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES		EATING 🍴	
International Plovdiv	Fairgrounds.....6 C1	Malak Bunardzhik.....17 A3	TRANSPORT
Roman Forum.....7 C5		Ristorante Da Lino.....18 B3	Avis.....(see 14)
		XIX Vek.....19 B3	Etap.....(see 33)
			Rila Bureau.....29 A6
			Rodopi Bus Station.....30 B6
			S & Z Rent-a-Car.....31 C1
			Tourist Service Rent-a-Car.....(see 16)
			Union-Ivkoni Vesna 61.....32 B6
			Yug Bus Station.....33 B6
SLEEPING 🛏		DRINKING 🍷	
Esperantsa.....8 C5	Planet Club.....9 C1	Plazma Light.....20 A5	
Hotel Avion.....9 C1	Hotel Leipzig.....10 B5	Simfonya.....21 C6	

TOURIST INFORMATION

The *Plovdiv Guide* and *Programata* are free, weekly magazines, listing local bars, restaurants and clubs. The latter is Bulgarian-only, though its website (www.programata.bg) is in English too. You can also try the municipal website www.plovdiv.bg and www.plovdivcityguide.com for more useful local information.

Tourist Information Centre (Map p140; ☎ /fax 656 794; tic@plovdiv.bg; pl Tsentralen 1; ☎ 9am-7pm) Well-informed Franz and colleagues provide maps, find local accommodation and more. It's by the post office.

Usit Colours (Map p142; ☎ 622 530; www.usitcolours.bg in Bulgarian; ul Konstantin Stoilov 12; ☎ 9am-5pm) The friendly Plovdiv branch of this international network issues ISIC cards for foreign students, provides a list of cafés, shops, restaurants and bars where a student discount applies, and books plane and bus tickets.

Sights
RUINS

Plovdiv's magnificent 2nd-century AD **Roman Amphitheatre** (Map p142; ul Hemus; admission 3lv; ☎ 8am-6pm), built by Emperor Trajan was, incredibly enough, only uncovered during a freak landslide in 1972. At its peak, the structure held about 6000 spectators. Now largely restored, it once again hosts large-scale special events and concerts. Visitors can admire the amphitheatre from several lookouts along ul Hemus, or from the cafés situated above. There's an unsigned shortcut from above the Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa along ul T Samodomov; enter through the passageway into the Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts on the right-hand side. Alternatively, you can pay the entrance fee and explore the marble seats and stage.

The once huge **Roman Stadium** (Map p142) is mostly hidden under the pedestrian mall and buildings; alas, a visionary plan to reconstruct the street with a glass walkway and so reveal the whole structure, remains unrealised. For now, 12 rows of the northern section have been restored, and are visible from the street. Above the ruins, a modern bronze statue of the city's founder – the 4th-century BC king of Macedon, Philip II – stands on a column.

Just down the steps at the overpass near pl Tsentralen, ruins of the **Roman Forum** (Map p140), are still being excavated; peer over the fence along the main road. Adjacent to the tourist information centre, the remains of a **Roman Odeon** (Map p142) have been partially restored. There's a tiny, reconstructed amphitheatre and some original columns. It's used for occasional performances.

Some 203m high in the old town, a hill contains sparse **ruins of Eumolpias** (Map p142), a Thracian settlement from about 5000 BC. The fortress and surrounding town enjoyed a strategic position, and it was later bolstered by Macedonians, Romans, Byzantines, Bulgarians and Turks, who named it Nebet Tepe (Prayer Hill). While the remaining rubble is rather formless, the site does offer great views. The hill is best reached from ul Dr Chomakov (the continuation of ul Sáborna). Partially restored remains of a 13th-century reservoir are also here.

MUSEUMS

Plovdiv's fascinating **Ethnographical Museum** (Map p142; ☎ 625 654; ul Dr Chomakov 2; admission 4lv; ☎ 9am-5pm) houses some 40,000 exhibits, including folk costumes and musical instruments,



INFORMATION

Internet Café Speed.....	1	A4
Internet Fantasy.....	2	B5
Litera.....	3	A3
USIT Colours.....	4	B3
Zeon Internet Cafe.....	5	A4

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts.....	6	B4
Apteka.....	7	C3
Archaeological Museum.....	8	A1
Atanas Krastev House (Red Pony Art Gallery).....	9	C3
Balabanov House.....	10	C3
Center for Contemporary Art (Chifte Banya).....	11	C2
Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa.....	12	B4
Church of Sveta Konstantin & Elena.....	13	C3
City Art Gallery.....	14	A4
Cultural Center Thrakart.....	15	B5
Danov House.....	16	B4
Dzhumaya Mosque.....	17	B3
Encho Pironkov City Gallery of Fine Arts.....	18	C3
Ethnographical Museum.....	19	C3
Hindlian House.....	20	C3
Historical Museum.....	21	D3
Imaret Mosque.....	22	B1
Lamartine House.....	23	C4
Museum of History.....	(see 8)	
Museum of Icons.....	24	C3

Nedkovich House.....	25	D3
Philippopolis Art Gallery.....	26	B3
Roman Amphitheatre.....	27	B4
Roman Odeon.....	28	A6
Roman Ruins.....	29	D3
Roman Stadium.....	30	A4
Ruins of Eumolpias.....	31	C2
State Gallery of Fine Arts.....	32	C4
Statue of Philip II of Macedon.....	(see 30)	
Sveta Marina Church.....	33	B4
Sveta Nedelya Church.....	34	D3
Zlatyu Boyadjiev House.....	35	C3

Accommodation Agency.....	36	A4
Dali Art Hotel.....	37	B4
Hebros Hotel.....	38	C3
Hikers Hostel.....	39	C3
Hotel Bulgaria.....	40	A5
Hotel Elit.....	41	A2
Hotel Renaissance.....	42	C5
Old Town Residence.....	43	C4
PBI Hostel.....	44	A6
Plovdiv Guest House.....	45	C3
Fine Arts.....	46	B6
Café Avenue.....	47	C5
Café Starino.....	(see 68)	
Dayana.....	48	A5
Dreams.....	49	A5
Gusto.....	50	B5

SLEEPING

Accommodation Agency.....	36	A4
Dali Art Hotel.....	37	B4
Hebros Hotel.....	38	C3
Hikers Hostel.....	39	C3
Hotel Bulgaria.....	40	A5
Hotel Elit.....	41	A2
Hotel Renaissance.....	42	C5
Old Town Residence.....	43	C4
PBI Hostel.....	44	A6
Plovdiv Guest House.....	45	C3

EATING

Art Cafe Philippopolis.....	(see 26)	
Café Avenue.....	46	B6
Café Starino.....	(see 68)	
Dayana.....	48	A5
Dreams.....	49	A5
Gusto.....	50	B5

Hebros Hotel Restaurant.....	(see 38)	
King's Stables.....	51	C3
Puldin Restaurant.....	52	C4
Restaurant Kambanata.....	53	B4
Restaurant Rahat Tepe.....	54	D3

DRINKING

Art Bar Maria Luisa.....	55	C6
Fashion Café.....	56	A3
Makalali.....	57	A3
Naylona.....	58	A3
Remix Music Club.....	59	C6
Sky Bar.....	60	A4

ENTERTAINMENT

Caligula.....	(see 60)	
Enjoy Club 69.....	61	A3
Gepi.....	62	A4
Infinity.....	63	A2
King's Stables Café.....	(see 51)	
Marmalad.....	64	A2
Nikolai Masalitinov Dramatic Theatre.....	65	A4
Paparazi.....	66	C6
Petnoto.....	67	B2

SHOPPING

Antique Shops.....	68	C3
Ponedelnik Pazar (Monday Market).....	69	D5

TRANSPORT

Plovdiv Airport Travel Agency.....	70	A6
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jewellery and examples of traditional crafts such as weaving, metalworking, winemaking and beekeeping. Traditional tools ranging from grape-crushers and wine-measures to apparatuses used for distilling attar of roses are also displayed. Upstairs, the restored 19th-century rooms have nice touches such as carved wooden ceilings. The most renowned Bulgarian National Revival-period home in Plovdiv, it was built in 1847 and owned by the eminent Agir Koyoundjioglou, later becoming a girls' boarding school and a tobacco and flour warehouse.

The **Historical Museum** (Map p142; ☎ 623 378; ul Lavrenov 1; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Sat), also called the Museum of Revival & The National Liberation, concentrates on the 1876 April Uprising and the Batak massacre (see the boxed text, p163). Built in 1848 by Dimitar Georgiadi, it's also called the *Georgiadi Kâshta*.

Due to reopen in 2008, the **Archaeological Museum** (Map p142; ☎ 624 339; pl Saedinenie 1) displays Thracian and Roman pottery and jewellery, and ecclesiastical artefacts, icons and liturgical paraphernalia. Hopefully the museum will exhibit its collection of 60,000 archaeological items upon reopening.

Housed within the Archaeological Museum, the **Museum of History** (Map p142; ☎ 629 409; pl Saedinenie 1; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) chronicles the 1885 Unification of Bulgaria through documents, photographs and belongings of the protagonists.

Visible through floor-to-ceiling windows in the Tsar Obединitel underpass, **Cultural Center Thrakart** (Map p142; ☎ 631 303; Podlez Arhaeologiski; ☎ 9am-7pm) contains extensive Roman floor mosaics and various artefacts from Roman (and earlier) times. Concerts are performed on the centre's small stage.

Apteka (Old Hippocrates Pharmacy; Map p142; ☎ 624 594; ul Sâborna 16; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a rarely open museum of pharmacy.

HOUSE-MUSEUMS

Plovdiv's 19th-century 'baroque' style house is typified by an overhanging upper storey with jutting eaves, a columned portico and brightly painted façade. The interior rooms feature finely carved woodwork, painted wall decorations and ornamental niches. Most also display art or other exhibits.

Once owned by merchant Stepan Hindlian, **Hindlian House** (Map p142; ☎ 628 998; ul Artin Gidikov 4; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), built in 1835,

is one of Plovdiv's most opulent. It's full of exquisite period furniture and walls painted with real and imaginary landscapes of Venice, Alexandria and Constantinople. These scenes, which took six months to complete, impressed visitors by showing the locales of the owner's overseas trading empire. The magnificent panelled ceilings and 'Oriental style' marble bathroom, with its high, domed ceiling and skylight are other highlights. The small **courtyard garden** is lovely, too.

In the Hindlian House cellar, the so-called **Wine from Bulgaria Museum & Oenology Collection** (☎ 635 376; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sat) conducts wine tastings (10 lv per person for three wines). A braver endeavour, the full tasting of 10 wines, costs 40 lv. Specialist courses are also offered.

The **Danov House** (Map p142; ☎ 629 405; ul Mitropolit Paisii 2; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Sat), dedicated to renowned writer and publisher Hristo Danov and several other Bulgarian authors, contains a re-creation of a bookshop and a National Revival-era classroom. There's an old printing press, and the **gardens** offer wonderful views. Enter through a wall up the laneway leading to the Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa.

Once owned by Luka Balabanov, a wealthy 19th-century merchant, the **Balabanov House** (Map p142; ☎ 627 082; ul Dr K Stoilov 57; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-7.30pm) was completely rebuilt in 1980 according to the original blueprints. It contains modern paintings and gorgeous antique furniture.

Built in 1830, the elegant **Lamartine House** (Map p142; ☎ 631 776; ul Knyaz Tseretelev 19; open by special arrangement), also called the Georgi Mavridi House, belongs to the Union of Bulgarian Writers. The building is named after the French poet, Alphonse de Lamartine, who stayed for three days in 1833, during his 'travels in the Orient'.

The **Nedkovich House** (Map p142; ☎ 626 216; ul Lavrenov; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1-6pm), dating from 1863, has a lovely, leafy courtyard that sometimes hosts art shows, but alas, the house is poorly lit inside. The highlights are the ornate wood ceiling and flowery wall paintings.

ART GALLERIES

Plovdiv's large and thriving artistic community continues creating and sustaining the city's many galleries – already bursting with the fruits of 200 years of Bulgarian painting.

On 28 September each year, the magical **Night of the Galleries** sees every Plovdiv gallery open, for free, from 8pm to 3am.

Encho Pironkov City Gallery of Fine Arts (Map p142; ul Vasil Konchev 1; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5.30pm Sat) displays Bulgarian modern art. It's down a small laneway downhill from ul Săborna.

Zlatyu Boyadjiev House (Map p142; ☎ 635 308; ul Săborna 18; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Apr-Sep, 8.30am-noon & 12.30-5pm Mon-Fri Oct-Mar), opposite Hikers Hostel (see p148) in the old town, contains paintings by Plovdiv native Zlatyu Boyadjiev (1903–76), many idealising the Bulgarian peasantry; some cover entire walls.

The **State Gallery of Fine Arts** (Map p142; ☎ 635 322; ul Săborna 14a; admission 3 lv, free admission Tue; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5.30pm Sat), occupying a mansion from 1846, contains outstanding works by 19th- and 20th-century Masters such as Goshka Datsov, Konstantin Velichkov and Nikolai Rainov. Look out also for Georgi Mashev and Master Vladimir Dimitrov's works.

The **Philippopolis Art Gallery** (Map p142; ☎ 622 742; ul Săborna 29; admission 2 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm) is Bulgaria's first private art gallery and occupies the well-restored Hadzhi Aleko house (1865). It boasts works by 19th- and 20th-century Bulgarian Masters such as Vladimir Dimitrov, Anton Mitov and Dimitar Gyudzhenov. Hospitable owner Stefan Maltzov happily provides background information and encourages you to take photos.

Beside the Church of Sveti Konstantin & Elena, the small **Museum of Icons** (Map p142; ☎ 626 086; ul Săborna 22; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm) has a sublime display of (15th century and up) icons.

The **City Art Gallery** (Map p142; ☎ 624 221; ul Knyaz Aleksandar 15; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-12.30pm & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-5.30pm Sat), another branch of the State Gallery of Fine Arts, holds small, temporary exhibitions of abstract art.

The **Atanas Krastev House** (Red Pony Art Gallery; Map p142; ☎ 625 792; ul Dr Chomakov 5a; admission 1 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Mar-Nov) was where local painter and conservationist Atanas Krastev lived until his death in 2003. His self-portraits and personal collection of (mostly) abstract 20th-century Bulgarian paintings are displayed. The cosy, well-furnished house is strewn with personal mementoes, and the terrace offers superb views. The garden also houses exhibits. Buy paintings by living legend Dimitar Kirov (see the boxed text, opposite) here.

THE MASTER & THE BALLERINA

Born in Istanbul in 1935 to a sculptor father, the gifted Dimitar Kirov was painting by the age of seven. Still working and living today in Plovdiv's old town, with Rosalia, his wife of 44 years – and one of modern Bulgaria's greatest ballerinas – Dimitar may well be the spirit of old Plovdiv personified. This living master of Bulgarian painting and mosaic art considers himself 'the last of an era', after the passing a few years ago of his best friend and fellow painter, Giorgi Bozhilov, nicknamed *Slon* ('the elephant').

With a faint smile peeking out of his beard, and kindly eyes set behind thick glasses, the laconic artist bedecked in a fedora hat and puffing on a cigar is truly a larger-than-life personality from another era. As he recalls the things that inspired him to create, his comments are animated by interjections from slender Rosalia, whose delicate beauty is still obvious, and who, though retired, still moves with the unmistakable half-steps of the ballerina.

The Kirovs have wonderful stories of the Bolshoi Theatre (where Rosalia was dancing when they decided to marry), of travelling the world with the Plovdiv Opera and of participating in the bohemian abstract art scene in Paris in the 1960s. Still, it was Plovdiv that initially inspired Dimitar and it was Plovdiv that called him back. When Parisian gallery owners, recognising the young painter's talent, asked him to stay, he told them no: 'I wanted to live in my country,' says Dimitar, 'and I'm still very proud of my decision to stay here.'

What inspires Dimitar most about Plovdiv? 'This city has 8000 years of culture,' he says, using a barely relatable Bulgarian idiom, 'and this beats me in the ankle.' What he means to say is that the city uplifts him: 'Old Plovdiv is a place you take energy from – it itself is my inspiration.'

Rosalia features prominently in his paintings. For her birthday in 2007, the painter threw his wife a party – an entire exhibition of portraits of her, displayed in the garden of the Atanas Krastev House gallery.

The couple's spacious home in the heart of old Plovdiv is perhaps the greatest museum you'll never see. Closed to the public, it contains hundreds of paintings and mosaics by this phenomenally prolific artist, clustered, jumbled and hung everywhere in a riotous outburst of colour. Bedrooms, living rooms and even a basement crypt are all filled to bursting with art, and not only Kirov's: works by other Bulgarian Masters, such as the great Vladimir Dimitrov – who also happened to be Rosalia's uncle – abound, and there are even works by Salvador Dalí, whose portrait Dimitar sketched in Paris.

Dimitar himself, puffing on his Cuban and resting amidst the wonderful mayhem of his art, is remarkably placid. He lets his wife do the talking.

'Before he was in a darker mood,' she says with her wonderfully warm smile. 'But now he's very happy, and everything's a celebration.'

You can see the works of Dimitar Kirov at art galleries around Plovdiv, and even buy them at the **Atanas Krastev House/Red Pony Art Gallery** (Map p142; ☎ 625 792; ul Dr Chomakov 5a; admission 1 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Mar-Nov).

The **Center for Contemporary Art** (Map p142; ☎ 638 868; Chifte Banya; admission 3 lv; ☎ 1-6pm Tue-Sun) is housed on pl Hebros in the Chifte Banya, an old Turkish bath, and hosts contemporary works.

RELIGIOUS BUILDINGS

The huge, three-aisle **Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa** (Map p142; ☎ 623 265; ul Săborna 1; ☎ 7am-7pm) stands atop a grand series of stone stairs at the old town's base. With its unmistakable pink and blue belltower, this church (built in 1844 on the site of a 9th-century shrine) contains icons and murals, includ-

ing one depicting a sword-wielding Turkish soldier harassing chained and lamenting Bulgarian peasants.

The **Church of Sveti Konstantin & Elena** (Map p142; ul Săborna 24), Plovdiv's oldest, was built over a late Roman church. It's dedicated to Constantine the Great, the 4th-century emperor who made Orthodox Christianity the state religion, and his mother, Sveta Helena. The current church, however, dates mostly to 1832. The wonderful iconostasis was painted by Zahari Zograf between 1836 and 1840, and the covered portico features sumptuous frescoes.

Originally built in 1561, **Sveta Marina Church** (Map p142; ul Dr Vulkovich 7) was burnt down 50 years later, rebuilt in 1783, and repaired in 1856. See the 17m-high pagoda-shaped wooden bell tower (1870), and the intricate, 170-year-old iconostasis.

The grand, reopened **Sveta Nedelya Church** (Map p142; ☎ 623 270; ul PR Slaveikov 40; ☎ 8am-5pm), built in 1578 and renovated in the 1830s, contains exquisite, carved walnut iconostases and now faded wall murals from the mid-1800s.

The **Dzhumaya Mosque** (Map p142; pl Dzhumaya), currently undergoing heavy renovation, is one of the Balkans' oldest, dating from the mid-15th century. This enormous structure with a 23m minaret was the largest of Plovdiv's more than 50 Ottoman-era mosques. Another

Ottoman structure, the **Imaret Mosque** (Map p142) is open; note the unusual minaret. It's between the Hotel Elit and the river.

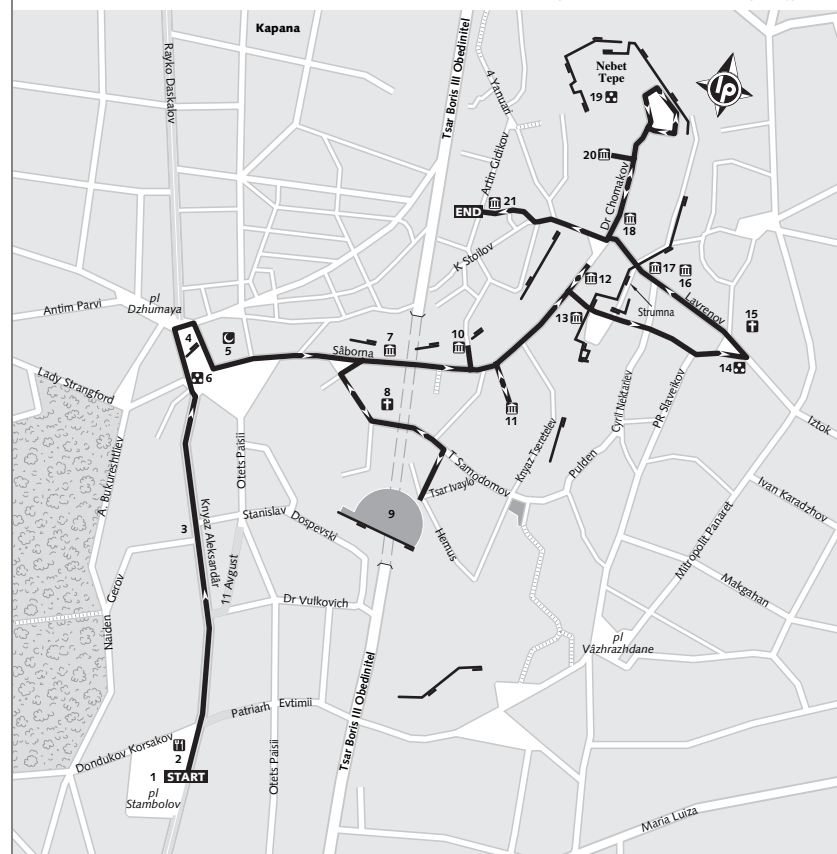
Walking Tour

Plovdiv's major sites can be seen in one day, though to really enjoy the numerous museums, mansions and churches, allow more time. The following tour follows a compre-

WALK FACTS

Start pl Stambolov
Finish Hindlian House
Distance 2.5km
Duration 1½ hours

OLD PLOVDIV WALKING TOUR



hensive route passing the major sites, most in the upper old town.

Note that this is no place for high heels: the large and irregular cobblestones, particularly in the upper half, make wearing sneakers or other low, comfortable shoes imperative.

Start at **pl Stambolov (1)**, perhaps with a morning coffee at **Dreams (2)** café, beside the square's grand fountain. Continue north down the chic pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Aleksandár, for some window (or real) **shopping (3)**. Continue to the next square, pl Dzhumaya; before **Dzhumaya Mosque (5)**, you will see the underground ruins of the **Roman stadium (6)**, and the unmissable modern **statue of Philip II of Macedon (4)** overhead.

Leaving the mosque to your left, proceed up ul Sáborna, the main old town thoroughfare. Soon you'll see, on the right, the enormous set of stone stairs leading to the **Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa (8)**; before climbing up, however, visit the **Philippopolis Art Gallery (7)** opposite. Then, after seeing the church, follow the street behind it (ul T Samodomov) leaving the large Academy of Music, Dance and Fine Arts to your right; enter the academy's small gate to gaze down on the magnificent **Roman amphitheatre (9)** below.

Retracing your steps, continue up ul Sáborna towards more art galleries and house-museums. The first (down a stairway to the left on ul Vasil Konchev) is the **Encho Pironkov City Gallery of Fine Arts (10)**; the second, further up ul Sáborna on the right-hand side, is the **State Gallery of Fine Arts (11)**. Further up ul Sáborna on the right is the **Zlatu Boyadjiev House (13)** and, on the opposite corner of a small street leading southeast, the **Museum of Icons (12)**.

Take the small street bisecting them right to admire some **Roman ruins (14)**, and turning left on ul Lavrenov, the **Sveta Nedelya Church (15)**. Continuing northwest up this street, see the **Historical Museum (17)** and **Nedkovich House (16)**, before passing under a walled gate and back onto the main street, ul Sáborna, which now becomes ul Dr Chomakov; turn right, and immediately you'll see the **Ethnographical Museum (18)**. Continuing uphill from here brings you to **Nebet Tepe** and the **ruins of Eumolpias (19)**, site of the original Thracian hill settlement. From here, double back to find, on your right, the **Atanas Krastev House/Red Pony Art Gallery (20)**. Continue down-

hill, taking your first right to reach the **Hindlian House (21)**; if it's open, celebrate your industriousness in the wine-tasting room downstairs.

Festivals & Events

International Plovdiv Fair (mid-May & late September) Week-long festival held in the massive fairgrounds (Map p140; ☎ 553 146; bul Tsar Boris III Obedinitel 37), located north of the river.

Cultural Month Festival (late May–mid-July) Performances and exhibits of opera, literature, painting and events celebrating the greatness of Bulgarian history.

Verdi Festival (early June) Two-week festival of opera concerts in the Roman amphitheatre, featuring Bulgarian and international singers.

International Festival of Chamber Music (mid-June) Ten-day festival.

International Folklore Festival (end July–early August) Folklore groups perform on the pedestrian mall for free by afternoon; evening shows performed in amphitheatre.

Thracia Summer Music Festival (www.geocities.com/thracia_festival; August) Regional traditional music, performed in the Balabanov House and the Ethnographic Museum; events also happen in Stara Zagora, Chirpan and other southern towns.

City Holiday (6 September) Celebration of the Day of National Unification (Narodni Saedinenie), ratified in Plovdiv in 1885. Unusually, officials shampoo the city's monument before the event.

Jazz Festival (September) Acclaimed international jazz festival.

Sleeping

While the fairs are on, in May and September, prices increase substantially.

BUDGET

Campers can choose between the **Complex 4th Kilometre** (off Map p140; ☎ 951 360; camping sites per person 3 lv, bungalows 28-38 lv; ☎ year-round) and the **9th Kilometre Complex** (☎ 632 992; www.leipzig.bg; bul Pazardzhikoshose; camping sites per person 3 lv, tents 3 lv, bungalow 20 lv, r renovated 32 lv, r unrenovated 25 lv; ☎ year-round). The former (also called Gorski Kat Camping), is a shady, loud place about 4km west on the old Sofia Highway. A restaurant-bar and water park is also there. Take bus 4, 18 or 44 west along bul Bulgaria, or bus 222 from the train station to its terminus and walk another 200m. The latter camping ground, owned by Plovdiv's Hotel Leipzig, is snazzier, with a restaurant and 24-hour bar. There's also a large outdoor swimming pool. Take a taxi (about 10 lv).

Hikers Hostel (Map p142; ☎ 0896764854; www.hikers-hostel.org; ul Sáborna 53; tent/dm/s/d with shared bathroom 12/20/43/48 lv, all incl breakfast; 🏠) The ideal place for independent travellers to chill in Plovdiv's old town, Hikers has comfy couches, outside tables, and sleeping choices ranging from tents and dorms to lofts and private rooms. The friendly, helpful staff all have different specialties: Petar is the hiking expert, Neli the queen of nightlife, and master of hospitality Natcho is the all-around problem-solver. There's free wireless internet, a computer, and laundry service (4 lv). There's also a private room and extra dorm in an apartment block near Dzhumaya Mosque, and discounted bookings at hostels in Sofia and Veliko Târnovo can be arranged.

Plovdiv Guest House (Map p142; ☎ 622 432; www.plovdivguest.com; ul Sáborna 20; dm/s/d with shared bathroom 20/30/60 lv; 🏠) If the Hikers Hostel is full, try this new place across the street. Its clean and bright dorms have 10, eight and four beds, and there's one spacious attic double. Dorms feature their own self-contained and modern bathroom/shower. The atmosphere is slightly formal, though an upcoming outdoor café out the back, above the ancient Roman wall, should improve the vibe.

PBI Hostel (Map p142; ☎ 638 467; hostel@pbihotel.com; ul Naiden Gerov 13; dm 20 lv; 🏠) Plovdiv's oldest hostel has a central location, near pl Stambolov, but is showing its wear, and has indifferent service. PBI offers internet and a bar, and the owner speaks English and Japanese.

Trakiya Hotel (Map p140; ☎ 624 101; ul Ivan Vazov 84; s/d 30/60 lv) This small hotel 100m from the train station has basic, clean rooms (with fan), and they are quiet despite the noisy location and popular bar downstairs.

Hotel Leipzig (Map p140; ☎ 654 080; www.leipzig.bg; bul Ruski 70; s/d unrenovated 36/50 lv, renovated 52/64 lv; 🏠) Renovations continue at this ageing yet popular high-rise, which boasts a 'Cuban' lobby bar, restaurant, beauty salon and wireless internet, to go with decent rooms (try a renovated one). Some have great views of the Hill of the Liberators.

For private accommodation, try the Tourist Information Centre (see p141), or the **Accommodation Agency** (Map p142; ☎ 272 778; ul Knyaz Aleksandar 28; r per person 22 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat) or **Esperantsa** (Map p140; ☎ 260 653; ul Ivan Vazov 14; r per person 22 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Sat).

MIDRANGE & TOP END

Hotel Elit (Map p142; ☎ 624 537; ul Rayko Daskalov 53; d/ste 60/100 lv; 🏠) The modern and reasonably

central Elit is on the corner of bul 6 Septemvri, just west of the Kapana bar district. The rooms are insulated from road noise, and it's clean and comfortable. The suites, however, are really glorified doubles.

Hotel Avion (Map p140; ☎ 967 451; www.hotelavion.info; ul Han Presian 13-15; s/d/ste incl breakfast 64/115/154 lv; 🏠 🏠) The Avion is a small, modern hotel on a quiet side street north of the Maritsa, offering smartly furnished doubles and suites. Rooms have nice wood floors and a back garden, and service is gracious.

Hotel Bulgaria (Map p142; ☎ 633 599; www.hotelbulgaria.net; ul Patriarh Evtimii 13; s/d incl breakfast from 70/130 lv; 🏠 🏠) On the central pl Stambolov, the Bulgaria has a worn, yet stately demeanour. Rooms are bright and modern, with good bathrooms and double-glazed windows that block street noise.

Dali Art Hotel (Map p142; ☎ 621 530; www.arthoteldali.com; ul Otets Paisii 11; d/ste/apt incl breakfast 90/110/132 lv) This intimate new boutique hotel off the mall has eight rooms, including two apartments, with appropriately minimalist décor. However, it's most distinguished by its friendly and relaxed staff, who give you the feeling of being in a home-away-from-home. Indeed, after only three years, the Dali boasts a 40% repeat visitor rate.

Hotel Maritsa (Map p140; ☎ 952 735; fax 652 899; www.victoria-group.net; bul Tsar Boris III Obedinitel 42; s/d/apt 90/160/280 lv; 🏠 🏠 🏠) Opposite the fairgrounds, the Maritsa is a lavish, renovated four-star hotel, offering attractive doubles with big bathrooms and suites sumptuously decorated in an ornate, vaguely French style. Facilities include a gym, business centre, restaurant and casino. It's popular with large weekend wedding parties.

Hotel Nord (Map p140; ☎ 907 959; www.hotelnord-bg.com; ul Ibar 33; s/d/ste 100/120/140 lv; 🏠) Opposite the Hotel Maritsa, this cosy place has bright, clean rooms and attentive staff. However, it doesn't offer the amenities of the larger and similarly priced hotels nearby.

our pick **Hotel Renaissance** (Map p142; ☎ /fax 266 966; www.renaissance-bg.com; pl Vâzhrazhdane 1; s/d incl breakfast from 100/160 lv; 🏠 🏠 🏠) This lovely new boutique hotel has an enviable location between the old town and the main square. It aims to recreate, with its intricate, hand-painted walls in the traditional Plovdiv style and handsome wood floors, the experience of being in a National Revival-era mansion at its peak. All rooms are unique and differently

priced. Friendly, English-speaking owner Dimitar Vassilev is a fount of local knowledge; ask him to show you the Ottoman-era property documents that accompanied the house. If going by taxi, tell the driver to take you to the adjoining Café Starino (see p150), the well-known local landmark.

The Old Town Residence (Map p142; ☎ 620 789; ul Knyaz Tseretelev 11; www.theoldtownresidence.com; d 100 lv, apt from 150 lv) This magnificent place with ornate, arched columns and elegant period furnishings is undoubtedly the old town's most romantic and regal hotel. It offers six doubles and three sumptuous apartments, and has an equally posh restaurant and bar (where noisy weddings are sometimes held on weekends). There are excellent views from the restaurant terrace. It's absolutely unbeatable for old-world ambience.

Noviz Hotel (Map p140; ☎ 631 281; www.noviz.com; bul Ruski 55; s/d/ste 100/140/170 lv; 🏠 🏠) While the Noviz is a small place, it's friendly and the rooms are large and well furnished. What people come for, however, is the excellent and inexpensive massage therapy; there's also a sauna and refreshing cold pool.

Hebros Hotel (Map p142; ☎ 260 180; www.hebros-hostel.com; ul Konstantin Stoilov 51a; s/d/ apt from 135/156/186 lv; 🏠 🏠) One of Plovdiv's most characterful hotels, this 200-year-old house is filled with antique furniture, all six rooms being individually decorated with National Revival-era flair. The bathrooms are sparkingly modern and there's also a Jacuzzi, sauna and well-regarded restaurant (see p150).

Trimontium Princess Hotel (Map p140; ☎ 605 000; www.trimontium-princess.com; pl Tsentralen; s/d/ apt from 176/215/293 lv; 🏠 🏠 🏠) The grand old Trimontium seeks to be to Plovdiv what the Grand Bretagne is to Athens or the Moskva to Belgrade, though this old-world elegance is more apparent in the public areas than the rooms. The huge lobby bar has marble floors, wedding-cake curtains and heavy leather chairs, where pipe-smoking people converse in various languages. Amenities include two restaurants, a bar, nightclub, fitness centre and hairdressers. The rooms, however, while certainly nice, are not nearly as striking as those found at some of Plovdiv's smaller hotels.

Novotel (Map p140; ☎ 934 444; www.novotelpdv.bg; ul Boyadjiev 2; s/d/ste 176/235/352 lv; 🏠 🏠 🏠 🏠) Currently Plovdiv's only five-star hotel, the enormous Novotel is in a modern, north-side high-rise. Rooms are large and comfortable, with all amenities, and there's a bar, restaurant,

nightclub and minispa centre with indoor pool, and clay tennis courts outdoors. However, there's a certain sad anonymity to it common to similarly impersonal business hotels.

Eating

Restaurant Rahat Tepe (Map p142; ☎ 624 454; ul Dr Chomakov; mains 2-5 lv) Way up in the old town, the outdoors Rahat Tepe serves simple meals such as salads, beef kebabs and fried fish.

King's Stables (Map p142; ☎ 0898542787; ul Sáborna; mains 4-7 lv; ☎ 9am-2am) The sprawling, summer-only King's Stables, opposite the Hikers Hostel, occupies a rolling hill ending in Roman walls. Offerings range from breakfast crepes to hearty meat dishes such as Thracian *gouviech* (melting cheese and sausage with seasonings cooked in a clay pot). It also features that relative rarity in Bulgaria – friendly service. The restaurant has two adjacent cafés.

Dayana (Map p142; ☎ 623 027; ul Dondukov Korsakov 3; mains 5-9 lv; ☎ 9am-late) This big place off the pedestrian mall, popular with locals and foreigners alike, has a huge (and colourful) menu strong on grilled meats. The staff seem overworked, so service can be slow.

Gusto (Map p142; ☎ 623 711; ul Otets Paisii 26; mains 5-9 lv; ☎ 9am-1am) Across the road from the Hotel Bulgaria, the friendly Gusto has diner-style booths upstairs and cosy tables downstairs, both with classy décor. While it's arguably not even the best thing served, pasta accompanied by wine seems the most popular choice.

Djoana (off Map p140; ☎ 961 909; cnr Pobeda & Dunav; mains 5-9 lv; ☎ 24hr) This big and often full *taverna*-style place north of the river is great for a hearty grilled meat and beer dinner.

Efir-100 (off Map p140; ☎ 961 117; cnr Pobeda & Dunav; mains 5-9 lv; ☎ 9am-late) Adjoining Djoana, and serving similar grilled meat specialties, this busy place (pronounced *efir-sto* in Bulgarian) has an eclectic, jungle-like décor. Entrées range from common standbys such as *shopska* salad and chicken *shishle* to more unknown commodities like 'dinosaur's tail on fire'.

Restaurant Kambanata (Map p142; ☎ 260 665; ul Sáborna 2b; mains 5-10 lv; ☎ 9am-midnight) Beneath the Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa, the Kambanata has tables set in ascending rows for watching live music. The food, however, is more prosaic, and somewhat overpriced, and they don't do breakfasts.

Skandariya (off Map p140; ☎ 955 093; bul Dunav 29; mains 5-10 lv; ☎ 9am-late) Another north-side eatery, and Plovdiv's best place for Serbian

skara (grilled meats), with an extensive wine list.

Malāk Bunardzhik (Map p140; ☎ 446 140; ul Volga 1; mains 5-10lv) Quality Bulgarian cuisine is served at this popular place with garden dining and live music most nights.

XIX Vek (19th Century; Map p140; ☎ 653 882; ul Tsar Kaloyan 1; mains 6-10lv; ☎ 7am-midnight) Pronounced *devetnastee vek*, this local favourite in a garden near the pedestrian mall offers traditional *satch* (a stew baked in a clay pots) dishes, charcoal-grilled shish kebabs and more. Its walls are decorated with traditional implements and décor reminiscent of a 19th-century village.

Ristorante Da Lino (Map p140; ☎ 631 751; bul 6 Septemvri 135; mains 8-15lv) Plovdiv's best place for Italian food, Da Lino occupies a converted monastery; however, prices are high and portions are small.

Puldin Restaurant (Map p142; ☎ 631 720; ul Knyaz Tseretelev 8; mains 8-15lv; ☎ 9am-midnight) The magical Puldin is one of Plovdiv's most atmospheric restaurants. In one dining room, the famous whirling dervishes of the Ottoman Empire once whirled themselves into ecstatic exhaustion, while in the cellar hall Byzantine-era walls and Roman artefacts predominate. Although expensive, the décor alone makes it worthwhile.

Hebros Hotel Restaurant (Map p142; ☎ 625 929; ul K Stoilov 51; mains 11-18lv) The upscale garden restaurant of the upmarket Hebros Hotel does excellent, and innovative Bulgarian cuisine, such as rabbit with plums, trout, pork with blue cheese and more.

CAFÉS

Café Starino (Map p142; pl Vázhrzhzdane; ☎ 8am-2am) One of Plovdiv's oldest and most atmospheric cafés, this dark, weathered place next to the Hotel Renaissance (p148) has a thick bar and pillowy, Ottoman-style bench-tables on the upper section. Behind the antique, handpainted walls are even older, Turkish-era sections. The Starino attracts mostly a subdued, local crowd.

Café Taksim Tepe (Map p142; ul Sáborna 47; ☎ 10am-midnight) With its patio setting overlooking Plovdiv's old red roofs, this tiny place has a relaxing vibe and (sometimes) plays ragtime and jazz. Despite the allusive name, it doesn't serve Turkish coffee.

Art Cafe Philipopolis (Map p142; ☎ 624 851; ul Sáborna 29; ☎ 10am-midnight) Adjacent to the Philipopolis Art Gallery, the café has a garden section with views, while indoors there's

a nonsmoking section. Light breakfasts and lunches are served, along with coffees and cocktails, though the musical offerings (the rock ballads of Bryan Adams and Aerosmith, over and over) could hardly be called arty.

Dreams (Map p142; ☎ 627 142; pl Stambolov; sandwiches around 2lv; ☎ 9am-11pm) This excellent and very popular café on pl Stambolov is the perfect place to relax before the square's giant gushing fountain on a balmy summer's day. It serves surprisingly good cakes, along with numerous alcoholic and nonalcoholic drinks. There's also a spacious upstairs hall.

Café Avenue (☎ 626 526; bul Maria Luisa 12; ☎ 7.30am-1.30am) Very popular with locally known personalities, black-clad businessmen and students too, this fashionable, dressed-up café plays retro, house and dance music.

Drinking

Plovdiv's nightspots are widespread. However, several good places occupy the district called Kapana, meaning 'the trap', referring to its inextricably tight streets for drivers, which includes the areas north of pl Dzhumaya, between ul Rayko Daskalov to the west and bul Tsar Boris Obединitel to the east.

Art Bar Maria Luisa (Map p142; bul Maria Luisa 15; ☎ 8am-4am) Too pretty to be just a dive bar, the Maria Luisa has dedicated owners who keep adapting the décor to suit their whims. The colourful downstairs is particularly stylish, vaguely reminiscent of 1920's Paris. This little place has a dedicated local following.

Makalali (Map p142; ul Giorgi Benkovski 7, Kapana; ☎ 9am-4am) While the African tribal theme is somewhat less obvious than the owners might think, Makalali is still a good, and often busy place, with a big cocktail menu, cool lighting and Fashion TV aspirations to go with its ambient house music.

Remix Music Club (Map p142; ☎ 0898607010; bul Maria Luisa 43a; ☎ 9am-late) This very chic new place is a chill spot for a daytime coffee, but gets loud at night when the beautiful people show up. It's full of colour and plasma screens, and smooth seats from some post-modern hair salon.

Planet Club (Map p140; ☎ 643 221; Ivan Andonov 5; ☎ 9am-2am) Don't be put off by the black windows on the big black Jeeps out front; the Planet is not really a Mafia bar, just a slick, fashionable place with an ultramodern interior and occasional wild excess (see the photos upon entry).

Simfoniya (Map p140; ☎ 630 333; Tsar Simeon Garden; ☎ 24hr) At the western end of the park, Simfoniya is a busy bar-café with drinks (and cakes).

Sky Bar (Map p142; ☎ 633 377; ul Knyaz Aleksandár 30; ☎ 24hr) You can't beat the Sky Bar, located atop one of Plovdiv's tallest buildings, for panoramic evening or night-time views in the company of a cold drink.

Fashion Café (Map p142; ☎ 632 131; ul Antim Parvi; ☎ 8am-4pm) In the shopping centre west of Dzhumaya Mosque, this popular place offers mixed musical styles and is popular with students, especially by night.

Plazma Light (Map p140; ☎ 033 055; Botev 82; ☎ 24hr) A very, very chic new bar with a nightclub behind, Plazma Light is one of the prime places to chill out to house music, with detached, island-like bars set in a sea of cream-and-black décor. Shiny screens and shiny people complete the mesmerizing effect.

Naylona (Map p142; ☎ 0889496750; ul Giorgi Benkovski 8, Kapana; ☎ noon-4am) They say that the owners of this Kapana dive bar purposefully didn't fix the roof, so that the rain would trickle in; whatever the story, this damp, bare-bones place usually playing classic (and other) rock remains the unwashed, long-haired antithesis of Plovdiv style.

Escada (off Map p140; ☎ 643 204; ul Tsaravets 22a; ☎ 7am-2am) The smooth modern look of this café/bar/restaurant with striped couches, a long bar and canopied outdoor seating is reminiscent of the smart Grecian cafés of Thessaloniki. It's good for a light lunch and has an upstairs nightclub. It's 2km west of the train station.

Entertainment

DISCOS & NIGHTCLUBS

Paparazi (Map p142; ☎ 0888715657; bul Maria Luisa 43; ☎ 11pm-6am) Plovdiv's longest-running nightclub, Paparazi has three big halls for DJ-driven house music, *chalga* (Bulgarian pop music) and hip-hop.

Enjoy Club 69 (Map p142; ☎ 0888699688; Evlogi Giorgiev 1; ☎ 11pm-6am) This scantily clad *chalga* club somehow combines brick-wall décor and plasma video screens, attracting students and wanna-be mafiosi as well.

King's Stables Café (Map p142; ☎ 0898542787; ul Sáborna) This summer-only outdoor café has two parts: a lower area beside the restaurant, with live music stage, and a funky upper bar (the 'second stage'), offering a short list of well-made cocktails. A DJ here spins chilled-

out tracks, sometimes accompanied by wafting, pungent incense.

Petnoto (Map p142; ☎ 0898542787; ul loakim Gruiev 36, Kapana; ☎ 8am-6am) The pinstriped Petnoto combines a bar, small restaurant and a music stage where Bulgarian bands and DJs perform.

Marmalad (Map p142; ☎ 631 834; ul Bratya Pulievi 3, Kapana; ☎ 9am-2am) This two-floor place is one of Kapana's best for live music. The upper floor is a bar, and the lower one a club where nationally known rock bands perform on Thursday. Tuesday features a piano bar, karaoke's on Wednesday, and DJs play on weekends.

Palmite (Map p140; ☎ 0889909536; ul Gladstone 15; ☎ 10am-6am) Translated as 'the Palms', this pumping *chalga* club shares its entrance with a fitness club and features male strippers (Thursday) and student nights (Sunday).

Nai Club (Map p140; ☎ 647 484; bul Vasil Aprilov 13a; ☎ 10pm-late) Bulgarian folk-pop blares out at this popular club; notably, there are frequent live performances, if you've been yearning to see the starlets of *chalga* in the flesh.

Infinity (Map p142; ☎ 0888281431; Bratya Pulievi 4, Kapana; ☎ 10am-late) Varied music is played at this studenty late club in Kapana.

Gepi (Map p142; ☎ 0888924301; Lady Strangford 5; ☎ 8am-4am) Live salsa, jazz, hip-hop and rock concerts happen at this slightly underground place with a bright, visually arresting lamp-lit interior.

Caligula (Map p142; ☎ 626 867; ul Knyaz Aleksandár 30; ☎ 10am-8am) Plovdiv's only gay club is, Bulgarian men only half-jokingly say, a nice place to meet girls. Whatever the case, the mixed crowd comes not only for the greased-up male pole dancers, but for the live music, DJs and neighbouring facilities (the Sky Bar is in the same complex).

CINEMAS

See recent foreign films in original languages (with Bulgarian subtitles) at **Luki Cinema** (Map p140; ☎ 629 070; ul Gladston 1), **Flamingo Cinema** (Map p140; ☎ 644 004; bul 6 Septemvri 128) or **Faces Cinema** (off Map p140; ☎ 683 310; bul Saedinieva, Trakiya District).

THEATRE & OPERA

Roman Amphitheatre (Map p142) The amphitheatre hosts Plovdiv's annual Verdi Festival (June), as well as other summertime opera, ballet and music performances.

Open-air Theatre (Map p140; Bunardjika) This theatre has summertime traditional music and dance performances.

Nikolai Masalitinov Dramatic Theatre (Map p142; ☎ 224 867; ul Knyaz Aleksandăr 38) One of Bulgaria's top theatres, it features anything from Shakespeare to Ibsen (most performances are in Bulgarian).

Plovdiv Opera House (Map p140; ☎ 632 231; opera@thracia.net; ul Avkentsiy Veleshki) Classic and modern European operas are performed in Bulgarian at this venerable hall.

Shopping

Trendy clothes and shoe stores line the pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Aleksandăr. Where this street meets pl Dzhumaya, south of the mosque, silver jewellery, icons and paintings are sold outside. Continuing up ul Săborna, you'll find several antique shops. Paintings by Bulgarian artists are sold in various cafés and galleries.

Finally, the busy Ponedelnik Pazar (Monday Market), over by pl Vazhrajane and the Hotel Renaissance, displays fresh fruits and vegetables (and the Bulgarians who buy them).

Getting There & Away

AIR

Only charter flights use Plovdiv airport; the **Plovdiv Airport travel agency** (Map p142; ☎ 633 081; ul Gladston 4) can therefore only book domestic and international flights to and from Sofia.

BUS

Plovdiv's three bus stations include the **Yug bus station** (Map p140; ☎ 626 937), diagonally opposite the train station, and a 15-minute walk from the centre (a taxi costs 3 lv to 5 lv). Alternatively, local buses (0.60 lv) stop across the main street outside the station, on bul Hristo Botev. From the Yug bus station, public and private buses go to the destinations listed.

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Bansko	7.50 lv	3½hr	2 daily
Blagoevgrad	7 lv	3hr	3 daily
Burgas (private)	15 lv	4hr	2 daily
Haskovo	4 lv	1hr	5 daily
Hisar	2.20 lv	1hr	12 daily
Karlovo	2.80 lv	1½hr	half-hourly
Ruse (private)	13 lv	6hr	1 daily
Sliven	10 lv	3hr	5 daily
Sofia	9 lv	2½hr	half-hourly
Stara Zagora	4.80 lv	1½hr	4 daily
Varna	15 lv	7hr	2 daily
Veliko Tărnovo (private)	11 lv	4½hr	3 daily

In summer, one or two daily buses leave this station for the Black Sea (Kiten, Ahtopol, Albena and Nesebăr).

From **Rodopi bus station** (Map p140; ☎ 777 607), through the underpass by the train station, 13 daily buses serve Haskovo and Karlovo and hourly buses (between 6am and 7pm) go to Smolyan (7.50 lv, 2½ hours), via Bachkovo (2.70 lv, one hour), Chepelare and Pamporovo.

The **Sever bus station** (off Map p140; ☎ 553 705), in the northern suburbs, has one daily bus to Pleven (10 lv), Ruse (12 lv), Troyan (7 lv) and Koprivshtitsa (6 lv).

Union-Ivkoni Vesna 61 (Map p140; ☎ 628 365; train station underpass; ☎ 8am-6pm) offers buses to international destinations, including Paris (180 lv), Rome (170 lv), Vienna (110 lv) and Amsterdam (170 lv).

Etap (Map p140; ☎ 632 082; Yug bus station) sells bus tickets to Istanbul (25 lv), Athens (95 lv) and more.

TRAIN

Plovdiv, along the major Sofia-Burgas line, has many trains; the main ones are given here.

Destination	1st-/2nd-class fare	Duration	Number of trains (daily)
Burgas	13.60/10 lv*	4hr*	6
Hisar	4.50/3.50 lv	2hr	3
Karlovo	4.30/3.30 lv	2hr	5
Sofia	9/6.50 lv*	2½hr*	14
Svilengrad	7.50/5.30 lv	3½hr	3

*denotes express trains

Plovdiv's **train station** (Map p140; ☎ 632 720; bul Hristo Botev) is well organised, though the platforms aren't numbered and the staff do not speak English. Computer screens at the station entrance and in the underpass leading to the platforms list recent arrivals and upcoming departures. You can store luggage here (2 lv per bag for 24 hours); the office is always open.

For international tickets see the **Rila Bureau** (Map p140; ☎ 446 120; ☎ 8am-6.30pm Mon-Sat), on a side street paralleling bul Hristo Botev. For information about international trains here, see p299.

Getting Around

Plovdiv is best experienced on foot. Much of the old town is off-limits to cars anyway, so with a taxi your most likely 'final destination' will be outside the Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa on ul Săborna, where all cars

must turn back (at night the street is usually open). Although taxi drivers conscientiously use meters, a few offenders charge rates as opprobrious as 4 lv per kilometre; the daytime base rate should be around 0.52 lv per kilometre, and at night, 0.59 lv.

For car rental, **Tourist Service Rent-a-Car** (Map p140; ☎ 623 496; Trimontium Princess Hotel) and **Avis** (Map p140; ☎ 934 481; Novotel) are well known but expensive; travel agencies along the mall or the tourist information centre can find better prices. For example, **S&Z Rent-a-Car** (Map p140; ☎ 967 410; bul Tsar Boris Obedinitel 26) rents from 30 lv per day.

AROUND PLOVDIV

Bachkovo Monastery

About 30km south of Plovdiv is the magnificent **Bachkovo Monastery** (admission free; ☎ 6am-10pm), founded in 1083 by Georgian brothers Gregory and Abasius Bakuriani, aristocrats then in Byzantine military service. The monastery flourished during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1396), but was ransacked by the Turks in the 15th and 16th centuries. Major reconstructions began in the mid-17th century. Bachkovo's now Bulgaria's second-largest monastery, after Rila.

In the courtyard, the **Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa** (1604) contains frescoes by Zahari Zograf from the early 1850s. Other highlights include the 17th-century iconostasis, more 19th-century murals and a much-cherished icon of the Virgin, allegedly painted by St Luke, though actually dating from the 14th century. Pilgrims regularly come here to pray before the silver-encased icon.

The monastery's southern side houses the former **refectory**, built in 1601. The walls are filled with stunning frescoes relating the monastery's history. A gate beside the refectory leads to a (rarely open) little courtyard; this leads to the **Church of Sveti Nikolai**, built in 1836. During the 1840s, Zograf painted the superb *Last Judgment* inside the chapel; note the condemned, nervous-looking Turks on the right and Zograf's self-portrait (no beard) in the upper-left corner.

Around 50m from the monastery entrance, the restored **Ossuary** features wonderful medieval murals, but remains closed.

A prominent explanation board provides monastic history (in English, French and German), and a map of **hiking trails** to nearby villages. The helpful guidebook (15 lv) is available at the monastery's shop.

SLEEPING & EATING

The monastery offers austere older rooms with shared bathrooms, and newer ones with their own bathrooms, for 20 lv per person and 40 lv per person, respectively. Enquire upstairs in the reception office.

Echo Hotel (☎ 048-981 068; d incl breakfast 50 lv) On the other side of the road, and river, from the monastery turn-off, this small place offers quiet, comfortable rooms.

Restaurant Vodopada (mains 4-7 lv; ☎ 9am-10pm) The best place to eat nearby, this is a charming courtyard restaurant, ranged around a waterfall and fish-pool, serving good grills and salads.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Take any of the regular buses to Smolyan from Plovdiv's Rodopi bus station (3 lv), disembark at the turn-off about 1.2km south of Bachkovo village and walk about 500m uphill. There are also direct buses half-hourly.

HASKOVO XACKOBO

☎ 038 / pop 78,450

Little-visited Haskovo has a distinct Turkish influence and is a staging post for journeys to Greece or Turkey via Svilengrad. For information on hiking from Haskovo, see the boxed text on p157.

Information

Bulgarian Post Bank (ul Otets Paisii)

Hebros Bank (ul Rakovski)

Internet Club (ul San Stefano; per hr 1 lv)

Sights

The **Historical Museum** (☎ 24 505; pl Svoboda; admission 1 lv) exhibits agricultural implements, folk costumes and archaeological finds. The museum keeps erratic hours.

The **Ezhi Dzhumaya Mosque** (ul San Stefano), built in the late 14th century, is probably Bulgaria's oldest mosque.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Aida (☎ 665 164; pl Svoboda; d 29 lv) This large, central old hotel has decent rooms and a fairly good restaurant.

Hotel Oasis (☎ /fax 663 248; ul Rakovski 10; s/d 40/84 lv) The Oasis, about 150m north of pl Svoboda, has smarter rooms than the Aida.

Hotel Central (☎ 660 333; ul Varna 1; d incl breakfast 48 lv; ☎) On a central pedestrian street, this place has bright, airy rooms.



Cafés and bars line the pedestrian mall. For pizzas, grills and salads, try **Restaurant Vesta** (☎ 35 730; ul San Stefano 20; mains 4-6 lv; ☎ 9am-midnight).

Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 24 218; ul Saedinenie) a dozen public and private buses depart daily for Sofia (12 lv, six to seven hours), five serve Plovdiv (4 lv, one hour) and several depart daily for Varna, Burgas, Gabrovo, Kazanlak, Stara Zagora and Svilengrad (the border with Greece and Turkey). Companies at the station, such as **ABAP** (☎ 0888375811), offer daily services to Istanbul (about 30 lv).

RODOPI MOUNTAINS РОДОПИ ПЛАНИНА

Vast stretches of serene pine forests, perilously steep gorges and hundreds of remarkable caves characterise the enthralling Rodopi

(rod-oh-pee) Mountains, which cover some 15,000 sq km of territory from east to west, spilling across into Greece. In fact, much of the border between the two countries is determined by the Rodopi range (85% of which is in Bulgaria).

Being relatively remote compared with the Rila and Pirin mountain ranges further to the west, the Rodopi Mountains see far fewer foreign visitors, with the exception of the major ski resorts of Pamporovo (p156) and Chepelare (opposite), and the spa town of Devin (p160). Outside of these areas, however, the region remains one of the wildest in Bulgaria, an endless expanse of majestic, thickly packed conifer forests where over 200 bird species and brown bears, wild goats and wolves dwell. The Rodopi Mountains are exceptionally rich in wildflowers, including indigenous violets, tulips and the unique *silivriak* – a fragile white flower said to have sprung up from the blood of Orpheus, the semidivine father of music, after he was torn to pieces by the frenzied Bacchantes.

Despite being sparsely populated, this mountain range named after a Thracian god,

Rhodopa, is dotted with hundreds of tiny villages where life has changed little in centuries. This is particularly so for the numerous, and quite conservative Muslim villages populated by Turks and Pomaks (Slavic Christians who converted to Islam to win benefits during the Ottoman occupation). The Rodopi area fell to the Turks in 1371 and suffered harshly under their rule, the most appalling episode being the massacre at Batak (see p163) in 1876. Today, relations between the various ethnic and religious groups are normal, though Bulgarians are nervous about rising Turkish nationalism here, manifested in low-level vandalism and other provocations, as well as more large-scale political power grabs.

Along with winter skiing, summertime outdoor activities such as hiking, horse riding and caving are all excellent here. The Batak and Dospat Lakes also providing opportunities for boating and fishing. There are over 700 mapped caves in the Rodopi Mountains, the most spectacular being near Trigrad (p162) and Yagodina (p163), though others, such as the partially underwater Golubovitsa (p159), are still being discovered. While the range's average height is only 785m, the highest peak – Mt Golyan Perelik, near Smolyan – rises to 2190m.

CHEPELARE ЧЕПЕЛАРЕ

☎ 03051 / pop 3000 / elevation 1150m

A laid-back, unprepossessing village and ski centre, modest Chepelare plans to link up to the far larger and louder Pamporovo, 6km down the road. In summer, the nearby mountains offer excellent hiking (see the boxed text, p157). Chepelare is supposedly undergoing EU-sponsored beautifications, though little progress is evident, partly because it has fewer old houses than more well-known traditional villages.

Information

The combined post office and telephone centre, near the square, has internet.

Chepelare.com The informative municipal website has ski information.

Hebros Bank (ul Vasil Dechev) About 300m down the main street from the square.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 2110; tic@infotel.bg; ul Dicho Petrov 1; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 1.30-6pm) A fairly helpful place 100m up from the square, on a side street, the centre provides detailed brochures about hiking routes, skiing and other activities.

www.orbita.bg/catalog.com Has snow reports, advice and accommodation information for all Bulgarian ski resorts.

Sights

Also called the Cave Museum, the **Museum of Speleology & Karst** (☎ 3051; ul Shina Andreeva 9a; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-5pm Mon-Fri) is unique in Bulgaria and, possibly, the Balkans. Minerals, bottled bats, remains of ancient cave-dwelling animals such as lions and bears, are exhibited, along with displays on the Trigrad and Yagodina caves. A tape in English and German gives explanations. The museum's in the Hotel Pesternika building, 200m up from the bus station on the hillside.

At time of writing, a **Museum of Ski & Sport** was scheduled to open, with displays devoted to the history of Chepelare skiing; consult the Tourist Information Centre.

Activities

SKIING

Chepelare is a humbler, more family-friendly place than Bulgaria's big ski resorts. However, it does offer world-class skiing: the two most famous trails, Mechi Chal I (3150m) a black-level, Super Giant Slalom course, and Mechi Chal II (5250m) are among Bulgaria's longest, and have hosted international competitions. Chepelare's three main trails equal 11.4km; a fourth, gently sloping trail is, so the tourist office humorously states, 'suitable for women and children'.

In fact, Chepelare's most famous native is a female athlete: Ekaterina Dafovska, biathlon gold medallist of 1998's Nagano Winter Olympics. Her success prompted local leaders to open an academy for skiing, snowboarding and, oddly enough, table tennis. The school (not for tourists) aims to train future Olympians.

The chairlift 1.5km south on the Pamporovo road, is signposted. At the time of writing, two new chairlifts were being installed. Chepelare also offers 30km of cross-country skiing. Hire gear at **Orion Ski** (☎ /fax 2142), by the lift, though note few instructors are available. Chepelare has a ski factory, and you can buy cheap, good-quality ski gear.

Sleeping & Eating

The tourist offices in Chepelare or Smolyan can book private rooms in Chepelare (from 20 lv per person with shared bathroom). Hotel prices increase significantly in winter.

Hotel Phoenix (☎ 3408; ul Murgavets 4; s/d 15/30 lv) About 200m up ul Vasil Dechev from the square, the Phoenix offers simple, spotless rooms with TV, along with a traditional restaurant.

Hotel Savov (☎ 2036; ul Vasil Dechev 7; d/tr/apt from 30/40/50 lv; 📍) Opposite the Hebros Bank, this comfortable place offers large, airy doubles, and apartments with sitting areas. The restaurant is popular and good.

Hotel Gergana (☎ 4201; ul Hristo Botev 75; d incl breakfast from 30 lv; 📍) The Gergana, along the Plovdiv road, is a cosy, family-run place with simple, clean rooms. Home-cooked traditional cuisine is served at the hotel restaurant.

More Chepelare hotels, signposted along the Plovdiv–Smolyan road, require private transport to reach.

our pick **Pelelanovska Konak** (☎ 2176; ul Dimitar Chichovski 10; mains 5–8 lv; 🕒 11am–1am Mon–Sat) This traditional Rodopean *mehana* may be in the back streets, across the river, but it's well worth seeking out. Tucked inside a little enclosure, it has cosy outdoor seating and a spacious, hunting-lodge interior with pelts and antlers on the walls. The enormous menu, strong on local dishes, includes the 'chef's special' *satch*, a riotous mixture of various meats, cheese and vegetables baked in a clay pot. Service is friendly and attentive.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is across a footbridge, 200m northeast of the square. Buses leave hourly for Smolyan (3 lv, one hour), via Pamporovo. Regular services between Plovdiv (6 lv, 90 minutes) and Madan, and Plovdiv and Smolyan, also stop in Chepelare.

PAMPOROVO ПАМПОРОВО

☎ 3095 / elevation 1650m

Pamporovo (Pam-*por*-ovo), 6km south of Chepelare, is one of Bulgaria's four major ski resorts. As with Bansko, rampant expansion has left the place – full of cranes, stacked building supplies and the skeletons of characterless, identical luxury apartments – looking like one monstrous construction site. However, unlike Bansko, there's no settlement – just a decentralised resort. Pamporovo is increasingly popular and thus more expensive, also expanding deeper into the forests, with almost 30km of new trails connecting Pamporovo with Chepelare (the 35,000 sq km 'Perelik

project') being planned at the time of writing – dismaying local environmentalists.

Although there's good nearby hiking, most of Pamporovo closes in summer. Other nearby villages have more atmospheric accommodation – making Pamporovo only recommendable if you're on a planned ski holiday. Otherwise, you can pass it by without feeling much guilt. The main cultural event for locals, the **Rozhen Folk Festival** (late August) occurs in the Rozhen fields between Pamporovo and Progled.

Orientation

The T-junction of the roads to Smolyan, Chepelare and Devin (via Shiroka Lúka) is Pamporovo's central point. From here, the amoeba-like resort spreads for 4km along several roads. Most hotels, restaurants and shops in remote parts are closed from May to October, but everything around the central Hotel Perelik is open year-round.

Information

Try www.bulgariaski.com for updated snow reports, advice and accommodation information for all Bulgarian ski resorts.

Activities

SKIING

Nestled in Bulgaria's deep south, Pamporovo and Chepelare boast over 250 days of sunshine a year. With significant snowfall between mid-December and mid-April, skiing conditions are often ideal.

Pamporovo's facilities are comparatively new and the slopes well maintained; however, the resort sprawls, so private transport is helpful. In winter, accommodation for independent skiers and travellers is scarce. If you're skiing here, consider cheaper accommodation options in Chepelare (p155), Momchilovtsi (p158), Smolyan (p159) and Shiroka Lúka (p160).

Pamporovo's eight downhill ski runs total 25km, and are complemented by 25km of cross-country trails and four training slopes. At least three new trails are being gouged out of the mountains between Pamporovo and Stoykite. The resort is at 1620m, with the highest trailhead rising to 1937m. Of Pamporovo's original five chairlifts and nine draglifts, a few operate during summer. Chairlifts cost 10/15 lv one way/return and a day pass costs about

HIKING IN THE RODOPI MOUNTAINS

Exploring the idyllic, forested region around Chepelare, Smolyan, Shiroka Lúka and Devin is the high point for nature lovers in the Rodopi region. First, get the English-language *West Rhodopean Region or Western Rhodope Mountains* maps (1:100,000) from the tourist offices in Pamporovo, Chepelare or Smolyan. They detail hiking trails of three to five hours, plus five mountain biking routes. Kartografia also has an excellent *Rodopi* map (1:100,000).

Julian Perry's *The Mountains of Bulgaria* describes (but with poor maps) a five- to seven-day trek from Hizha Studenets, near Pamporovo, to Hizha Rodoposki Partizanin, near Hrabrino, about 14km southwest of Plovdiv. *Hizhas* are available.

For shorter hikes, base yourself in Shiroka Lúka or nearby Devin. Nine marked trails, including one to Chepelare, via Kukuivitsa (two to three hours one way) and another to Mt Golyam Perelik (five to six hours), begin here. Other excellent hikes along marked trails include:

Batak to Hizha Teheran About four hours.

Chepelare to Hizha Igrev About three hours. From there, continue to Shiroka Lúka (three hours) or Pamporovo (seven hours).

Haskovo to Hizha Aida Twenty-six kilometres west by road (four to five hours).

Pamporovo to Progled An (easy) five-hour return trip across the lovely Rozhen fields.

Smolyan to Hizha Smolyanski Ezera About three hours one way.

50 lv. Minibuses from the hotels to the lifts are free if you have a lift pass.

Pamporovo offers trails for beginners and ample instructors speaking English or German, plus a children's ski kindergarten. Most instructors charge about 200 lv per person for 12 to 24 hours' group training, spread over six to 12 days.

Over a dozen ski shops rent gear, including the **Sport Shop** (☎ 0888552354) in the Hotel Perelik complex. A full set of equipment costs 40 lv to 60 lv per day. Pamporovo is ideal for snowboarding; visit the popular British-run **Snow Shack** (snowshack_uk@yahoo.co.uk) in the Hotel Markony complex for snowboarding gear and/or training courses.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

In summer, Pamporovo Sports Services, in the Pamporovo Shopping Centre between Hotel Perelik and Hotel Murgavets, arranges **mountain bikes** (6 lv per hour), **hiking guides** (from 15 lv per hour) and **tennis** courts and equipment. Around the central T-junction, **horse riding** is offered (20 lv to 25 lv per hour). For **hiking**, see the boxed text above.

Sleeping & Eating

It's useless describing Pamporovo accommodation in depth, as most foreign visitors come on prearranged package tours, or on day trips from Plovdiv. In winter, the hotels' rates are 25% higher than those quoted here.

Hotel Perelik (☎ 8405; pamporovo@bsbg.net; www.pamporovoresort.org; s/d from 40/50 lv; 📍 📞 📺) This monolith was being renovated (again) at the time of writing, and will soon offer smarter and more expensive rooms, plus the old facilities (a bowling alley, shops, restaurants and disco).

Hotel Murgavets (☎ 8317; s/d/apt from 60/100/120 lv; 📍 📞 📺) A giant hotel next to Hotel Perelik, with large comfortable rooms; facilities include a gym, health and beauty centre and kids' playground.

Hotel Finlandia (☎ 8374; s/d from 90/120 lv; 📍 📞 📺) The four-star Finlandia has clean, classy rooms plus a nightclub, health centre and ski school with English- and German-speaking instructors; there's also a kindergarten for depositing unnecessary baggage while on the slopes. The price includes compulsory half-board.

Pamporovo's numerous bars, cafés and restaurants offer varied, though inevitably touristy and overpriced food – for authentic Bulgarian cuisine, try the less frequented local villages.

Getting There & Away

The hourly Smolyan–Chepelare buses pass Pamporovo, as do the regular Smolyan–Plovdiv, and Smolyan–Sofia buses. A few daily buses from Sofia go directly to Pamporovo (14 lv, four hours) and up to eight leave from Plovdiv (8 lv, two hours). The bus

stop is at the 'Ski Lift No 1' chairlift at the central T-junction.

MOMCHILOVTSI МОМЧИЛОВЦИ

☎ 03023 / pop 3000 / elevation 1100m

Much smaller and more peaceful than Pamporovo, little Momchilovtsi (Mom-*chil-ov-tsi*) occupies a mountainside about 3km up from the main Chepelare–Smolyan road. Several solitude-seeking Bulgarian painters and writers live here, and expensive holiday villas belonging to the Sofia elite are also found in Momchilovtsi. It's an alternative and cheaper base to Chepelare or Pamporovo, and a relaxing place for summer hikes.

The new **Center for Mountain Sport & Tourism Momchilovtsi** (☎ 2823; www.momchilovtsi.hit.bg), on the square, provides local information and assistance for outdoor activities. It finds private rooms and hotel accommodation (from 8 lv and 20 lv per person, respectively). The centre rents ski equipment (15 lv to 18 lv per day) and provides ski instruction (18 lv per hour for individuals, or 15 lv per hour if in a group) as well as free transport to the ski run, 10km away at the **Momchilovtsi Fun Park**. The one ski trail here is elementary, though snowboarders will have more fun on the several jumps.

In summer the centre organises **rock climbing** trips and rents **mountain bikes** (10 lv per day).

If it's closed, the centre can open the **Historical & Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 2272; ul Byalo More), where traditional crafts by local artists and weavers are sold.

Usually sleepy Momchilovtsi comes alive for the four-day celebration of the **Sveti Konstantin & Elena holiday** (21 May).

Several signposted *pensions* are along the main road about 500m south of the square; try the **Rodopchanka Hotel** (☎ 2863; ul Byalo More 40; d/apt 48/72 lv).

Shadravana Restaurant, in the park below the square, offers Bulgarian dishes, and there are a few other cafés around.

Buses between Smolyan's eastern Ustovo bus station (1.40 lv, 45 minutes, 11 daily) and Banite, and Plovdiv and Banite, regularly pass through Momchilovtsi.

SMOLYAN СМОЛЯН

☎ 0301 / pop 34,300 / elevation 1000m

The longest and highest town in Bulgaria, Smolyan is actually an amalgamation of four villages, and the southern Rodopi Mountains'

administrative centre. The steep and forested mountains rise abruptly on its southern flank, lending a lovely backdrop to a town that's otherwise slightly timeworn and gritty. As in most of the Rodopi region, there's a notable Pomak Muslim population here.

Smolyan, first settled by Thracians around 700 BC, is an alternative place to stay for skiing Pamporovo and Chepelare, though certainly not the most beautiful one. It's the transport hub for villages such as Shiroka Lúka and Devin. Smolyan is also a base for exploring the seven **Smolyan Lakes**, the **caves** of Golubovitsa, partially underwater, and Uhlovitsa, with its bizarre rock formations (see the boxed text, opposite).

For **hiking** information, see the boxed text on p157.

Orientation

The 10km-long Smolyan overlaps, from west to east, the villages of Ezerovo, Smolyan, Raikovo and Ustovo. The partially pedestrianised main street, bul Bulgaria, has ATMs, a post office, and cafés and restaurants on its western end. The concrete, and often eerily deserted civic centre complex, is further east, opposite the forlorn Hotel Smolyan; here, too, are the main post office, a couple of banks and a supermarket, café and restaurant.

Information

Regional Association of Rhodope Municipalities

(☎ 62 056; bul Bulgaria 14) Near the tourist office; represents the 20 local districts and has local arts and crafts information or organises tours or guides.

Tourist Information Center

(☎ 62 530; www.rodopi-bg.com; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–2pm Sat) Beside the Hotel Kiparis, this very helpful English-speaking centre has plenty of brochures and local information.

Sights

HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Smolyan's **Historical Museum** (☎ 62 727; Dicho Petrov 3; admission 5 lv; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–5pm Mon–Sat), up behind the civic centre, has exhibits including Palaeolithic artefacts and Thracian armour and weaponry. Rodopi weaving and woodcarving, plus numerous traditional musical instruments and folk costumes (most notably the fantastical Kuker outfits worn at New Year celebrations) are also shown. Upstairs contains photos and models of traditional buildings.

SMOLYAN'S MYSTERIOUS CAVES

In ancient times, the road to hell was paved with water; so, too, in today's Bulgaria. Although not exactly replicating the voyage to Hades along the River Styx, the journey into the recently discovered **Golubovitsa Cave** is a thrilling and similarly aquatic one. Located 3km south of Uhlovitsa Cave (see below), off the road between Smolyan and Mogilitsa, the cave is accessible by boat, as the first 25m or so is completely underwater. After that, you walk, accompanied by lantern and a guide, and for daredevils, there's even a way down by rope.

Golubovitsa tours are arranged by the **Marsalitsa Club** (marsalitsa@abv.beg; Mogilitsa village). Contact either Aleksei Kodzhebashev (☎ 0887630274) or Aleksander Inev (☎ 0889293070) to arrange a guided tour, which costs 14 lv per person, and includes boots, lanterns and other equipment (including the boat). See the English- and Bulgarian-language website www.arda-tour.org for photos and more information.

The more established **Uhlovitsa Cave** (admission 4 lv; ☎ 10am–4pm daily summer, Wed–Sun winter), about 3km northeast of Mogilitsa, boasts numerous waterfalls (most spectacular in winter) and some bizarre formations, but requires private transport; check with the Marsalitsa Club or Smolyan Tourist Information Center for more details.

SMOLYAN ART GALLERY

Opposite the museum, the **Art Gallery** (☎ 62 328; Dicho Petrov 7; admission 5 lv; ☎ 9am–noon & 1.30–5pm Tue–Sun) boasts some 1800 paintings, sketches and sculptures by local, national and foreign artists.

PLANETARIUM

Bulgaria's biggest **planetarium** (☎ 83 074; bul Bulgaria 20; admission 5 lv), about 200m west of Hotel Smolyan, offers a spectacular show (35 to 40 minutes) with commentary in English, French or German at 2pm from Monday to Saturday, and in Bulgarian at 3pm from Monday to Saturday, and Sunday at 11am and 3pm. The foreign-language shows are for groups of five or more; otherwise, you'll pay 15 lv for a solo viewing.

Sleeping

The tourist office finds private rooms (about 22 lv per person).

Three Fir Trees House (☎ 38 228; dreitannen@mbox.digsys.bg; ul Srednogorec 1; s/d 24/34 lv; ☎) This place is 200m east of the main bus station, with well-maintained rooms. It's signposted, down the steps from bul Bulgaria. Bathrooms are shared. There's an excellent, varied breakfast (5 lv), and the helpful, multilingual owner arranges tours and rental cars, plus a cheap laundry service.

Hotel Babylon (☎ /fax 63 268; ul Han Presian 22; d/tw/apt 36/52/70 lv) This central place offers large, two-room apartments with comfortable lounge, plus a downstairs bar and res-

taurant. It's behind the little park, above bul Bulgaria.

Hotel Smolyan (☎ 62 053; www.hotelsmolyan.com; bul Bulgaria 3; s/d/apt from 36/52/80 lv; ☎) This antiquated ex-communist hotel facing the civic centre has clean but forlorn rooms; some have balconies overlooking Smolyan's lovely forests.

Hotel Kiparis A (☎ 64 040; www.hotelkiparis.com; bul Bulgaria 3a; s/d/apt 42/62/102 lv) A relatively new hotel located between the tourist office and Hotel Smolyan, it's a vast improvement on its neighbour with bright, modern rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Starata Káshta (ul Studenska 2; mains 4–7 lv; ☎ 4.30pm–2am) Also known as the Pamporovata Káshta, this place offers a short menu of grills and salads. The attractive National Revival-style house (built in 1840) has a few rough-hewn, log cabin-style outdoor tables and benches. It's up the steps from bul Bulgaria.

Rodopski Kat (bul Bulgaria 3; mains 5–8 lv; ☎ 7am–2am) This new restaurant, wedged between the Hotel Smolyan and Hotel Kiparis, is excellent for traditional Rodeopean fare.

Riben Dar (☎ 63 220; ul Snezhanka 16; mains 6–10 lv) In the western neighbourhood of Nevyasta, this is the place for delicious fresh fish, such as Rodopi Mountain trout. Take a taxi (3 lv to 5 lv).

Club Venus (bul Bulgaria 11; ☎ 24hr) Sleepy Smolyan's best entertainment spot, the Venus is popular at night, and serves good food. There's a wi-fi hotspot, too.

Getting There & Away

Most buses to/from Smolyan use the **main bus station** (☎ 63 104; bul Bulgaria) at Smolyan's western end. Four daily buses serve Sofia (18 lv, 3½ hours) and hourly buses serve Plovdiv (11 lv, 2½ to three hours), via Chepelare (3 lv, one hour) and Pamporovo (2 lv, 30 minutes). From this station, buses also serve Shiroka Lûka and Devin (4.50 lv, 90 minutes, three to four daily), for Trigrad and Yagodina Caves.

From near the station, local buses 2 and 3 (0.60 lv, every 20 minutes) serve the centre /Hotel Smolyan. Walk left out of the station and turn left up a double set of stairs; after 50m, you'll see the stop on the left. The taxi rank is further down the street. By taxi, it's around 2.50 lv to the Hotel Smolyan/Tourist Information Center.

Alternatively, if you're heading out on the Smolyan–Pamporovo–Chepelare–Plovdiv road, minibuses conveniently go from Hotel Smolyan's car park – saving you the trip back to the bus station. They leave every hour on the hour between 8am and 5pm.

Some 10km east, the **Ustovo bus station** (☎ 64 585; ul Trakia) serves less-visited eastern villages such as Momchilovtsi (1.40 lv, 45 minutes), as well as Kardzhali (9 lv, four hours, two daily). Local buses 3, 8, 9, 11, 14 and 18 travel between the main bus station and Ustovo station, via the Hotel Smolyan. The ticket offices at both stations close for lunch from 12.30pm to 1.30pm and, though kind, the workers don't speak English.

SHIROKA LÛKA ШИРОКА ЛЪКА

☎ 03030 / pop 1500

Tiny Shiroka Lûka, hugging the forested road between Smolyan and Devin, is famed for its three arching bridges and 19th-century National Revival homes. This hamlet has few services, but does have a **tourist office** (☎ 233; www.rhodope.net; ☎ 9am–5pm) near the square, providing general information and maps, including the useful *Western Rhodope Mountains* map (1:100,000). Staff can book private rooms in Shiroka Lûka and surrounding villages, such as tiny Gela (7km north), legendary birthplace of Orpheus. For local hiking information, see the boxed text on p157.

The village's sites include the **Church of the Assumption**, built in less than 40 days in 1834. Its uproarious outdoor fresco depicts a funeral procession followed by dancing demons; more sedate icons and murals are inside,

with the iconostasis chronicling the story of Adam and Eve. The **Ethnographical Museum** in the Kalenjiëvi Kâshta house generally opens only for organised bus tours.

Shiroka Lûka is renowned for traditional Rodopean music; see the week-long **music festival** in mid-April. The **Kukeri** (first Sunday in March) is a classic seasonal festival with likely pagan roots, when locals don frightening masks, bells and elaborate costumes for a spring cleaning of evil spirits.

The local tourist office, and the Smolyan and Chepelare ones, books private rooms in Shiroka Lûka.

Guesthouse Vasilka (☎ 666; sharkov@hotmail.com; r from 30 lv; ☎), at the village's peak, offers simple rooms with balconies and home-cooked meals.

Hotel Margarita (☎ 693; d/apt incl breakfast from 40/60 lv; ☎) is along the main road west of the creek, and has fine rooms.

Restaurant Shiroka Lûka (☎ 318; mains 4–8 lv; ☎ 11am–midnight Mon–Sat), in the centre, is the village's only real restaurant, but the food doesn't match the idyllic surroundings.

Buses between Smolyan and Devin pass six to eight times daily. Alternatively, take a taxi from Devin (around 20 lv).

DEVIN ДЕВИН

☎ 03041

One of Bulgaria's best spa towns, placid Devin is somewhat dated though it does offer solitude, services and one or two café-bars. Still, it's the kind of place where unworried mothers leave their baby carriages outside the shop while browsing, and the only noise you'll hear at night is the far-off baying of hounds.

Devin's famous for producing Bulgaria's premier brand of bottled mineral water, and for its balneological resort; indeed, plenty of wealthy Sofians (driven in black Jeeps with tinted windows) frequently come for discreet, five-star luxury treatment. However, the slightly faded town hardly resembles a resort, and you can take in the waters inexpensively outdoors, hike the lovely local eco-path and stay in budget accommodation. Devin also makes a handy base for visiting nearby caves.

Information

Even if the municipal tourist office reopens someday, you're best off heading straight to **Travel Escape** (☎ 2411, 0896734204; cnr ul Osvozhdenie

& ul Orpheas), run by the very helpful and experienced Irina Ilieva, who converses in five languages. Irina both finds local private accommodation and organises local outdoors activities (see right).

The **Internet Club** (ul Orfei), in the House of Culture, has slow connections.

A couple of ATMs are along the main street, others by the House of Culture and Orpheas Spa & Resort.

Sights & Activities

A comically gruff reception awaits visitors at the little **Devin Museum** (ul Orfei; admission 1 lv; ☎ 10am–12.30pm & 1.30–5.30pm Mon–Sat), which exhibits Rodopi folk arts and crafts, ancient and medieval coins, and colourful minerals from local mountains. Prominently positioned reproductions of salacious 19th-century paintings depict wicked Turks whipping Bulgarian women, hurling Bulgarians babies and carrying off slaves. The roomful of traditional implements and machinery, however, is quite interesting, and also displays the *gayda* (Balkan bagpipe) of Bai Mihail (see the boxed text, p162). In winter the museum operates only in afternoons.

The belltower of the **Church of Sveti Duh** (Church of the Holy Spirit), built in 1937, tolls out the hours from high over the houses of Devin. The church is not particularly traditional, but contains many icons and a wood-burning stove.

If you seek the Devin spa experience, but don't want to pay at the big hotels, bathe with the locals at the outdoor **mineral baths** (5 lv per person), 4km west of town in a gorgeous wooded setting between steep hills. Boasting a large bath and a smaller one for kids, this well-kept facility includes a café and nearby restaurant. There's a sand volleyball court and inexpensive massages are available. In summer, the baths work 24 hours, in winter, according to demand. To go by taxi, ask for *Struilitza Parking* (the car park of the baths). The 10-minute trip costs 3 lv.

Continue 30 seconds down the road, leaving the baths on your left, to the **Devin eco-path**. Part of the EU-funded Beautiful Bulgaria project, this lovely trail follows the Vacha River through lush countryside, eventually winding uphill into the mountain. A sort of triangular loop, beginning and ending at the baths, takes in the ruined **Devinsko Kale** (Devin Castle), where locals once made a desperate

last stand against the Turkish onslaught. The whole hike takes about three hours. There are a couple of picnic tables along the way.

Irina Ilieva of **Travel Escape** can arrange guided **hiking** and **caving** tours. Multiday **horse riding** to the Greek border, with stopovers in mountain huts along the way, is another of the enjoyable local activities arranged here. Irina has info on an intriguing nearby traditional farm, just opening at the time of writing, and on how to obtain the rare, endemic *mursalski* tea – racyly called the 'Bulgarian Viagra'.

Sleeping

Private rooms (from 15 lv per person) can be arranged by Irina Ilieva of **Travel Escape** (☎ 2411, 0896734204; cnr ul Osvozhdenie & ul Orpheas; ☎ 9am–5pm).

Paunovata Kushta (☎ 2628; paunovatakashta@vbs_bg.com; ul Stara Planina 3; s/d 20/30 lv) This is a new guesthouse, 100m up the road going immediately left after the bus station, then up the hill and over the bridge. It has clean and comfortable rooms; ring ahead as there's not always someone there.

Hotel Elite (☎ 2240; ul Undola 2; s/d/apt 50/70/80 lv; ☎) On the central pedestrian street, the Elite has large, well-kept rooms with gleaming modern bathrooms; doubles have bathtubs. The basement mini-spa includes sauna, Jacuzzi and massage rooms.

Villa Ismena (☎ 4872; fax 3917; ul Goritsa 441; s/d/apt 55/85/160 lv; ☎) At the top of a steep road, the signposted Ismena is a modern villa offering quality rooms with smart décor, balconies and sparkling bathrooms. The restaurant's terrace has views, and the modest spa centre does various therapeutic programmes.

Spa Hotel Devin (☎ 2513; www.spadevin.com; ul Druzhiba 2; s/d/apt from 66/110/160 lv; ☎) One of Devin's most popular places, this hotel has breezy and cheerful rooms, a very good restaurant (see p162), and arguably offers therapeutic treatments equal to or better than the snazzier (and much pricier) new five-star Orpheus. The hydrotherapy centre includes swimming pools, Jacuzzi and various therapeutic and 'antistress' programmes. There's a café-*sladkarnitsa* (sweet shop) and casino. During summer, various outdoors activities are organised.

Orpheus Spa & Resort (☎ 2041; fax 6245; www.orpheus-spa.com; Tzvetan Zangov 14; s/d/ste 116/137/214 lv) Sofia's upper strata finds itself drawn as if by

magnetic attraction to this giant gingerbread mansion, its centre dominated by a gigantic pool over which an enormous faux crystal improbably rises. Fortunately, the wealthy guests' desire for discretion means the hotel, behind the pedestrian mall, has not ruined Devin's solitude. Rooms are luxurious, and the spa centre revels in exotic treatments involving gold dust, diamonds and caviar. There's a fitness centre, Jacuzzi, pool, tennis courts and a football pitch. The hotel's two restaurants include a lavishly decorated Turkish one (see below).

Eating & Drinking

Oriental Restaurant (☎ 2041; fax 6245; www.orpheus-spa.com; Izvetan Zangov 14) In the Orpheus resort, the Oriental serves Turkish kebabs and is decorated with the requisite couches, pillows and gauze.

Complex Struilitsa (☎ 0888838971; mains 5-7 lv; ☎ 10.30am-midnight) This restaurant by the public mineral baths is up a short trail that veers left above the car park, in the forest. It does Bulgarian grills and salads and has a lovely terrace.

Bulgarsko Selo Restaurant (☎ 2513; www.spadevin.com; ul Druzha; mains 7-15 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) In the Spa Hotel Devin, this place does reasonably priced meat dishes, and more expensive regional specialities. The cosy folk décor is enhanced by the open oven, where you can watch the chef roasting huge, crunchy slabs of bread. The restaurant is also the definite winner of the prize for most hysterical English-language entrée title – 'girl spittle'.

In town, the Royal Café, within the unmissable obshtina (municipality) building, is good for a drink. The nightclub below it attracts a fairly juvenile crowd.

Getting There & Away

From **Devin bus station** (☎ 2077) buses serve Smolyan (4.60 lv, 1½ hours, six daily), Plovdiv (7 lv, three hours, four daily) and Yagodina (3.80 lv, 40 minutes, 8am Monday to Saturday). A daily bus to Sofia (12 lv, four hours) leaves at 6.45am. Alternatively, catch a bus to Plovdiv, which has numerous bus and train connections to the capital. All Smolyan-bound buses stop in Shiroka Lúka.

AROUND DEVIN

The Caves of Trigrad & Yagodina

The most accessible and developed Rodopi caves are south of Devin, near Trigrad and Yagodina. Admission to both caves includes a guided tour, in Bulgarian only.

The **Trigrad Cave** (☎ 0889052208; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm May-Sep, shorter hr rest of year), also called the Devil's Throat Cave (Dyavolskoto Gurlo Peshtera) has extensive and speleologically significant grottoes. The mandatory, 20-minute guided tour requires three or four tourists; you can stay longer, under the caretaker's supervision. As you descend, you can hear (but unfortunately not see) a 45m-high waterfall. Exiting involves a somewhat daunting set of steep steps. You may see a (harmless) bat or two flitting about.

Trigrad village is 2.3km south of the road from the cave entrance. **Guesthouse Silivryak**

(☎ 03040-220; s/d 15/30 lv; ☎), above the square, has six cosy rooms, and the owner, Kosta Hadjiiski, is the cave boss, and thus a knowledgeable and experienced caver. Devin and Smolyan provide more accommodation options; alternatively, try the Muslim village, Borino, which has 17 daily buses to Devin (2.50 lv, 30 minutes). The friendly **Family-Hotel Royal** (☎ 03042-2830; s/d from 10/20 lv; ☎) is the best Borino option. From Trigrad, you can hike to Yagodina (about 2½ hours).

The spectacular, 8km **Yagodina Cave** (☎ 03419-200; admission 4 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm May-Sep, shorter hr rest of yr) is the longest known Rodopi cave and, with its many abysses and labyrinthine tunnels, also one of Bulgaria's deepest. The 45-minute tour highlights the remarkable stalagmites and stalactites, which resemble curtains, and mentions the Neolithic settlers who lived here 8000 years ago. Visitor numbers permitting, tours leave on the hour every hour between 9am and 4pm, except at midday. From 1 October to 1 May, at least six visitors are required for the tour; otherwise, you pay 15 lv. In summer, 10 visitors (or 25 lv) are required. Remember that no matter how hot it may be, caves are chilly, so pack extra clothes.

Family-Hotel Yagodina (☎ 03419-310; s/d from 15/30 lv; ☎) is a small, modern place with comfortable, clean rooms and balconies. The cave is 6.4km south of the turn-off along the Smolyan-Dospat road, and 3km south of Yagodina.

You can hike to Trigrad or ask for directions in Yagodina to the **South Rodopi Ecotrail**; contact the tourist office in **Smolyan** (☎ 0301-62 530) or **Shiroka Lúka** (☎ 03030-233) for details.

BATAK BATAK

☎ 03553 / pop 4500

Although Batak is most famous in modern Bulgarian lore for its bloody history (see the boxed text, right), this quiet, depressed town is today mostly known for the Batak Lake, great for summertime fishing and swimming. Boats can be rented near Hotel Panorama, and local hiking information is given in the boxed text on p157.

Sights

The Church of Sveti Nedelya, the Ethnological Museum and the History Museum are Batak's major (and adjacent) attractions. The ticket costs 2 lv (admission free on Thursday). Visit

THE MASSACRE AT BATAK

During the 1876 April Uprising most of the population of Batak fought against the Turks under the leadership of Peter Goranov. They successfully held the Turks at bay for nine days before the aggressors eventually gained control. In brutal retaliation, the Turks burned down the village and massacred almost every citizen (between 5000 and 6000 people). The massacre was reported in the English press and (eventually) acknowledged and denounced by the British government. It was the catalyst for the Russo-Turkish War that started a year later.

the History Museum first to ensure the other two are unlocked.

On the square, the **History Museum** (☎ 2339; pl Osvozozhenie; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) contains graphic displays about the 1876 April Uprising, the Batak Massacre and the Russo-Turkish War. The downstairs crypt lists locals who fought the Turks.

The **Church of Sveti Nedelya** (☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat), built in 1813, was the final refuge for 2000 locals who fought the Turks in 1876. Signs of the subsequent massacre, such as bullet holes and a macabre, half-covered tomb with dozens of skulls, are gruesomely evident. The **Ethnological Museum** (☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sat), one of Batak's few National Revival-period houses, contains late-19th-century costumes.

Sleeping & Eating

Batak itself has no hotels, but several line the lake's southwestern shore. The gigantic **International Youth Tourist Centre** (☎ 3385; s/d/apt incl breakfast 30/40/50 lv; ☎), also known as the Orbita Hotel, has tennis and basketball courts, rents bikes and organises excursions.

These hotels, and several cafés and restaurants, line the 1.2km-long access road, which starts about 7km west of Batak along the Rakitovo road. The larger hotels are open year-round, but some cafés and restaurants only operate on weekends, especially during winter.

Getting There & Away

Four daily buses connect Batak with Plovdiv. The three daily buses between Batak and Velingrad pass the turn-off to the lake.

THE ENCHANTED PIPE OF BAI MIHAIL

Near the end of WWI, a young man from Chepelare named Mihail was dispatched to the front, along with six fellow Rodopean friends. Bulgaria had been at war almost continuously for six years, and the exhausted, dismayed young men resolved to desert. However, they were caught by the military police, and condemned to death for treason.

When told to make his final request before being executed, Mihail said: 'Just bring me my *gayda* so I can play one last song.' The goatskin bagpipe was duly brought, and Mihail struck up a traditional old Rodopi tune. When the homesick, weeping soldiers started to sing along, the commander, realising he'd have a mutiny on his hands if he went through with the executions, ordered the sentences to be commuted. 'Bai' (an affectionate Rodopi term, translated roughly as 'uncle') Mihail went on to live out the rest of his long and distinguished life in Devin, as one of the leading local personalities (and musicians) of this quiet mountain settlement.

Today, the memory of this beloved Rodopi elder is preserved in popular legends and tales. And, while it's no longer played, the enchanted pipe of Bai Mihail can still be seen, in a glass case at the Devin Museum.

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