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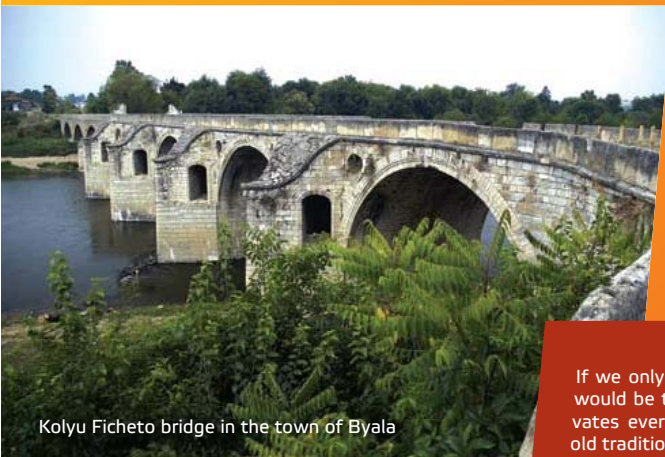
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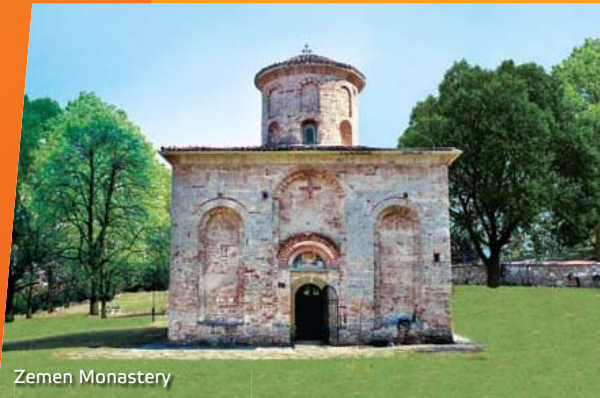


Baba Vida Fortress

If we only had to use one word to describe Bulgaria, it would be the word „magic“. This is a country that captivates everybody with its magnificent nature, centuries-old traditions and rich history.



A Bulgarian folk dance



Zemen Monastery



Belogradchik Rocks



A house in Bozhentsi



Apollonia Festival of Arts



Asen Fortress



Sozopol

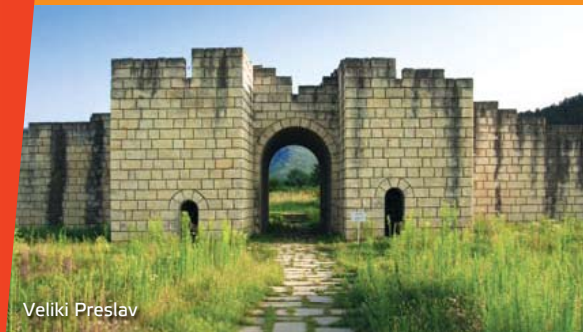
Nature and development of Bulgarian civilization

In the Bulgarian lands you will find the treasures of some of the most ancient peoples that inhabited Europe. Situated between the East and the West, and having favorable climate and natural resources, the country has always been a site of continuous cultural exchange. Every local city museum has an abundant and rich collection of antiques and cultural remains that will reveal to you the world of the country's most ancient citizens, as well as their religious, cultural and everyday necessities. One of the most famous treasures, the Varna Chalcolithic Necropolis, provides the world with the oldest processed golden treasure in Europe (dated back to the 5th millennium BC).

The Bulgarian state was established in 681 by the union of Proto-Bulgarians and Slavic tribes. In ceaseless battles for supremacy and through a continuous transfer of values, Bulgaria created its rich and idiosyncratic civilization. The country established itself through the ages as one of the centers of spiritual and material cultural heritage like literature, architecture and jewelry. Even today, in the capital cities of Pliska, Veliki Preslav and Veliko Tarnovo, you can feel the glorious past of the country's heyday. An important moment in the country's development was establishing Christianity as the official religion. Thanks to the Slavic alphabet, which was created here, the literary movement in the kingdom achieved a strong spiritual uplift. This new religion started to spread from these lands all across the Balkan Peninsula.

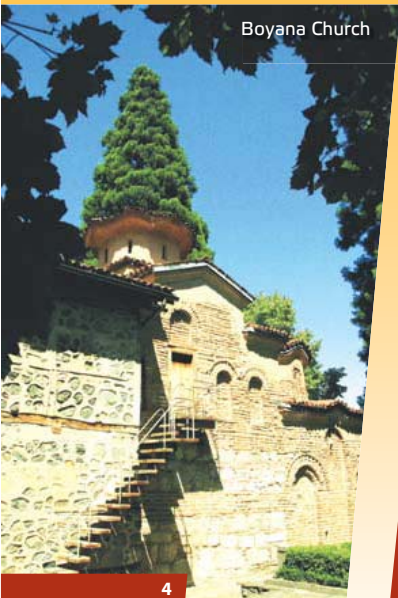


Neolithic Dwellings Museum in Stara Zagora



Veliki Preslav

Boyana Church



A dome in the Rila Monastery

The church and monastery frescoes from this period are magnificent. The Boyana Church near Sofia can be compared to the Renaissance paragons, although it precedes them by a century and a half. The monasteries near Ivanovo, the Aladzha Monastery and the Bachkovo Monastery will amaze you with the mastery of their builders, artists and woodcarvers, as well as with the splendid combination of natural environment and location of the religious facilities. Particularly imposing is the capital Veliko Tarnovo together with the Tsarevets hill and with its astonishing urban plan, walls, churches, towers, and everyday life facilities.

When conquered by the Turks in the 14th century, Bulgaria ceased its state development. However, this provided an opportunity to create a number of Christian monuments that helped to preserve the population's ethnicity and integrity. Iconography, wood-carved altar making, and church and monastery building schools were established. The country experienced its Renaissance, called „the Revival“, hence entering the Modern Age.

Today, Bulgaria is part of the European Union and has modern urbanized cities. Eclectic and at the same time distinctive, modern Bulgaria can be enjoyed by everyone who appreciates and seeks historical sites. This is a country where legends are being told, images and architecture speak of great times and treasures lead us toward worlds of gods.



Sofia National Palace of Culture

The Thracians' world and heritage

The Thracians have left behind a multitude of cultural monuments that grow in number every year thanks to archeological excavations. Unconquerable warriors, mystical priests and skilled jewelers, they mastered metal, gold, and silver making. They were very good singers and musicians. They honored nature and its gifts and knew how to utilize the laws that govern it.

Notable among their crafts were iron-smithery, especially weapon making, as well as processing bronze perfectly. They were also making bronze bracelets, rings, clothing ornaments, horse decorations and arrow tips. Vine-growing was also very important; the Thracians' love for wine is well-known. Local goldsmiths used to make breastplates from silver and gold that are representative of Thracian items of clothing, ceremonial decorations for the kings, their entourage and their horses. The breastplates were also used for phials and rhytons when drinking on special occasions.

Various hand-made and pottery items, bronze horse harness decorations, and 6th-4th century BC iron weapons in the Thracian necropolises were discovered in the Varna Region near the villages of Dobrina, Kipra, Brestak, etc. Weapons and bronze items distinctive for the Thracian culture can be found in many places in Bulgaria. Their horse decorations are created in the so-called „animalistic style“, which is highly sophisticated. This is evidenced by a number of bronze findings such as appliques and headwear for horse headstalls that are abundant in any Bulgarian city museum.

The most distinctive and also most well-studied display of Thracian aristocratic culture are the opulent funerals, often conducted in monumental tombs and under imposing burial mounds. It is believed that the number of Thracian burial mounds in Bulgaria exceeds 100,000. Wealthy mound funerals have been studied and opened for visitors in the mounds near the village of Duvanli, in the Plovdiv Region, in the Mound of Mogilan in Vratsa, near the village of Sveshtari, the Ispereh Region, near the village of Mezek, in the Svilengrad Region, and many others.



Starosel



Perperikon

The Kazanlak Tomb is famous for its magnificent murals. In the domed room, in the central depiction you can see a noble Thracian crowned with a wreath and seated beside a low table, with his wife next to him on a throne. By his side is a procession of musicians, servants with gifts and stablemen with a chariot and horses. This procession will make you sense the splendor and magnificence of the Thracians' ancient customs.

The wealth of the Thracians can also be assessed based on their treasures that are being discovered today. Particularly impressive is the Panagyurishte Treasure, consisting of nine golden vessels richly decorated with figural compositions. The biggest treasure discovered so far is the Rogozen Treasure, consisting of 165 silver vessels, most of which richly ornamented. Only five, but magnificently made, are the silver vessels of the treasure discovered near the village of Borovo, in the Ruse Region. The treasures of Lukovit and Letnitsa contain silver horse harness decorations with interesting figural images. All treasures mentioned above can be seen in the Bulgarian National Museum of History in Sofia.

An impressive tomb with beautiful murals was discovered in 2001 near the village of Aleksandrovo, in the Hasko-



Part of a mural in the Akeksandrovo Tomb



Panagyurishte Golden Treasure



A frieze in the Thracian mound in Sveshtari

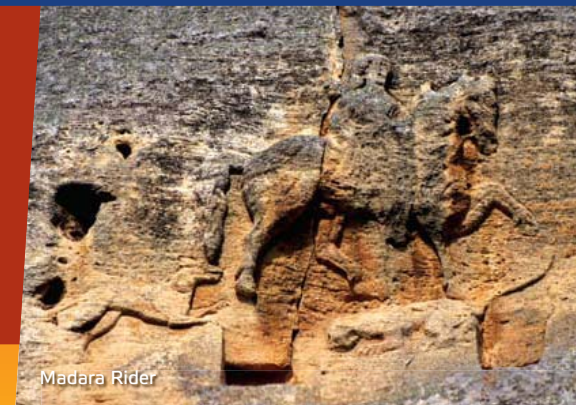


Roman remains of the Hisarya Fortress

vo Region. In 2004, a golden mask of a Thracian king, as well as a silver wine rhyton depicting the head of a horned animal were discovered in the Svetitsata mound, in the Kazanlak Region, where a Thracian ruler was buried. The inside of the grave is paneled in wood. It contains the remains of a human skeleton, one bronze vessel and three big well-preserved clay amphorae. The discoveries still continue today.

From the Middle Ages to modernity – the Bulgarian capitals

The best way to get to know Bulgaria is to visit the country's capitals, which are part of its national heritage. Pliska, Preslav, Veliko Tarnovo and Sofia are the face of the Bulgarian state since its creation up until today. They have witnessed rise and fall, grandeur and oblivion during different periods of the country's development. These ancient sites, rich in archeological, historical and cultural monuments, are major tourist destinations.



Madara Rider

First Bulgarian Kingdom – Pliska and Veliki Preslav

For two centuries, from the establishment of the Bulgarian state in 681 and up to 893, Pliska was the main political, military, cultural and economic center. In addition to this, it is among the most imposing monuments of medieval Europe's urban development.

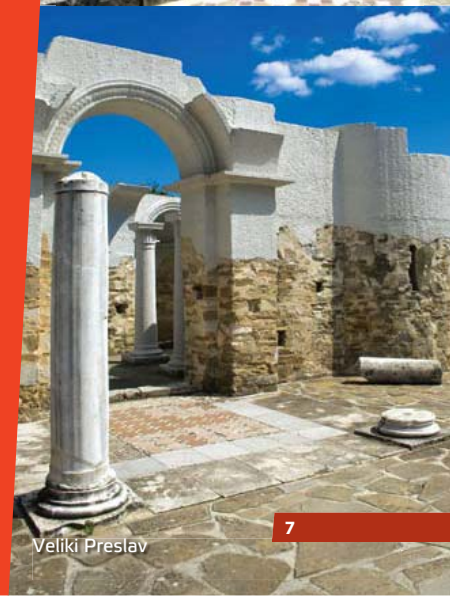
Situated in the middle of a wide hilly area, the first Bulgarian capital was protected by strongly fortified walls. Khan Krum's palace is among the most remarkable monuments here. The tourists might find the secret entrances interesting; they enabled the inhabitants to leave the city without being seen. The palace had a large water reservoir and baths that were advanced for their time.

The large-scale construction activities carried out during the second phase of Pliska's development are related with the name of the Bulgarian Khan Omurtag. The monuments from his reign include the so-called „Little Palace” with residences for members of the Khan's family, the new baths with sophisticated heating installations, two pagan temples and the exceptionally decorated Throne Room.

Pliska is the historical city that witnessed the conversion of the Bulgarians to Christianity. The city has preserved early Christian religious buildings of imposing size, the most striking being the Big Basilica. With its 2920 m², it was the biggest Christian church on the Balkan Peninsula. The huge three-aisled church, 100 m long and 30 m wide, was surrounded by a large monastery with a complex architecture.



Pliska



Veliki Preslav

Veliki Preslav is the second Bulgarian capital (893-971) that is worth visiting. King Simeon I moved the capital from Pliska to Veliki Preslav and transformed the latter into one of the most majestic cities in South-Eastern Europe (the „Golden Age“ of Bulgarian history). The inner city includes the king's residence structure with its monumental stone palaces, such as the Big Palace and the Throne Room with its columns, as well as the Round Church (10th century), richly decorated with mosaics, marble and ceramic icons.

The archeological findings include the impressive ceramic icon of St. Theodore Stratelates, the Preslav Golden Treasure, the ceramic iconostasis from the Palace Monastery and a unique collection of lead seals.



St. Cyril and Methodius monument

The medieval capital of Bulgaria – Veliko Tarnovo

Veliko Tarnovo, the medieval capital of Bulgaria, is astonishing with its unique beauty. The city is located in Central Bulgaria, at the foot of Stara Planina. The old part of the city is situated on the historical hills Tsarevets, Trapezitsa, and Sveta Gora.

The investigation, preservation and restoration, and presentation activities carried out, as well as the large-scale construction and development works, have transformed this incredible city into a fairy tale, a desired place for a vacation and for reconnecting with antiquity and modernity. Unique cultural monuments related to the glorious history of the Bulgarian people were created and preserved here throughout the centuries-long existence of the city. The preserved remains of fortresses, palaces and churches are silent witnesses of the blossoming Bulgarian culture in the 12th-14th century.



Tsarevets Fortress



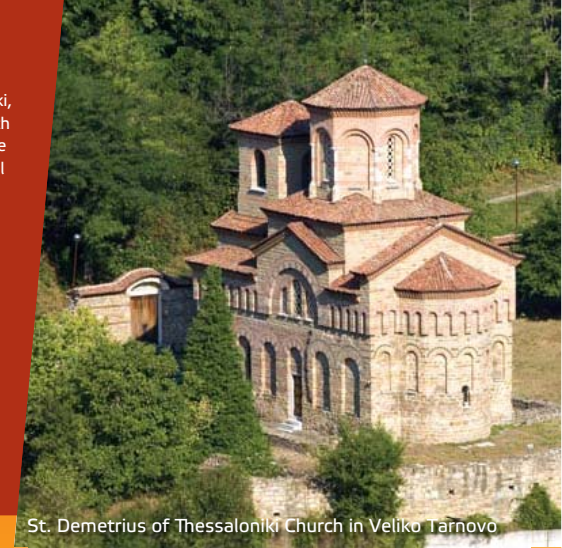
Transfiguration Monastery

The proximity of the ancient city Nikopolis ad Istrum, the unique architectural and historical village of Arbanasi and the numerous monasteries create favorable conditions to satisfy the scientific and cultural interests of people of all ages.

Two glorious Bulgarian ages meet here, the Middle Ages, when Veliko Tarnovo was the Bulgarian capital (12th-14th century), and the Revival, when the city became a center of everything new and progressive. First among the most famous tourist attractions is the Tsarevets hill. During the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, the hill was the residence of the king's court, the boyars and the patriarch. It is surrounded by a fortified wall built upon natural vertical cliffs. Here you can find the Baldwin tower, parts of the palace and the Ascension of Christ Patriarch Church. Other sanctuaries in the city include

the St. Forty Martyrs, St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, and St. Peter and Paul churches, as well as the Birth of the Holy Virgin Cathedral. The city is also impressive with its original and unique architecture of the Revival period.

A unique attraction is presented by the Sound and Light audio-visual show. Dramatic music, colored lights, lasers and church bells tell the glorious and tragic story of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185-1393). The show is a unique experience and adds up to the magic of Veliko Tarnovo. Hundreds of colored lights and three laser beams present moments of the battles against the Ottoman hordes, the years of the Turkish yoke, the revolutionary movement and the Liberation. The show can be best seen from the Tsar Ivan Asen II square in front of Tsarevets.



St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki Church in Veliko Tarnovo

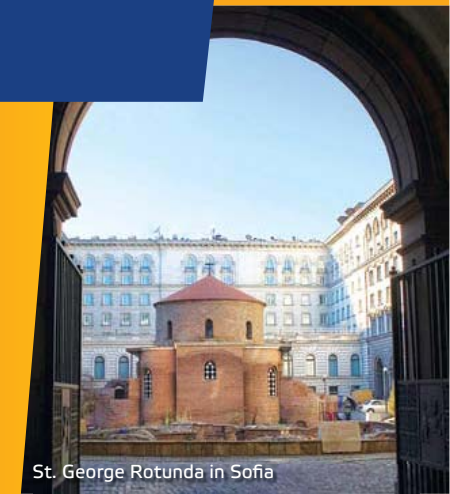
Sofia – ancient and forever young

Sofia is not only the capital, but also the heart of Bulgaria. The city is a cultural, educational, administrative and industrial center. Its motto rightly states: „Grows up, but never gets old“. The city is surrounded by enchanting mountains – Stara Planina to the North, Vitosha to the South, Lozenska to the Southeast and Lyulin to the Southwest.

Sofia has a 7000-year long history. The ancient Thracian city of Serdika is established on the site of a Neolithic village in the 8th century BC. The reason for populating these lands are the hot mineral springs that even today are still abundant in the capital's central part. Under the Roman Empire, the city was the center of the Roman province of Lower Dacia. Towers, fortified walls, administrative and religious buildings were erected. Emperor Constantine the Great called the city „My Rome“. Khan Krum added Sofia to his kingdom's territory in 809.

At this time the city had the Slavic name of Sredets, which means „middle part, center“. Later, in the Middle Ages, it was named „Sofia“ after the St. Sofia Temple that exists to this day in the most central part of the city. A number of new churches were built, the Boyana Church being among the most famous and impressive, as well as beautiful administrative buildings. The documents of the Ottoman conquerors describe the city as fascinating. Sofia turned out to be an important crossroad on the Balkan Peninsula and gained the status of a crafts and trade center.

Today, Sofia is abundant with business and trade centers, dynamic night life and cultural landmarks. A lot of spare time is needed to visit these landmarks and it certainly cannot be done in one go. There are numerous museums, including the Museum of Natural History, the National Museum of History, the Earth and Man Museum, the Ethnographic Museum, and many others, as well as galleries and theatres.



St. George Rotunda in Sofia



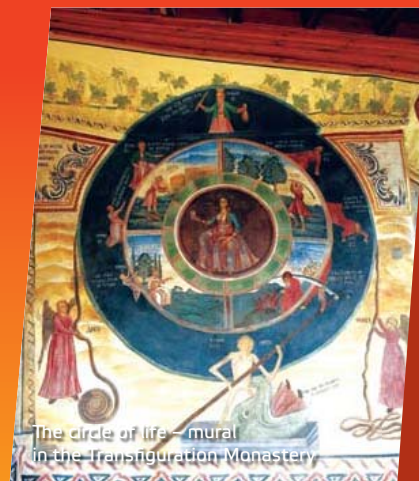
View of Sofia

The St. Alexander Nevsky Temple Monument is among the symbols of the city. It is a spectacular building; its belfry is 50.52 m high and in clear weather you can see the gold-plated domes kilometers before you enter the city. Right next to the temple is the oldest St. Sofia Church that the capital was named after. The square around the temple is also interesting, hosting the Unknown Soldier Monument with its eternal fire, and the open market of antiques. Nearby are the Russian St. Nikolay Church, the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and the Parliament. It is also interesting to visit the St. Cyril and Methodius National Library, as well as the St. Kliment Ohridski Sofia University, the first Bulgarian institution of higher education. A Roman rotunda transformed into the St. George Church is situated in the inner yard of the Presidency.

A favorite place of local citizens and a key meeting point is the National Palace of Culture (NPC). The building has 16 halls, the biggest containing 5000 seats. It is a multifunctional compound, a contemporary castle synthesizing modern architecture and plastic arts. The magnificent spaces are brought to life by more than 100 works of monumental painting, sculpture, woodcarving, tapestry and repoussage. NPC is a focal point of the capital's cultural life, as well as the site of prestigious congress and conference activities, business and political events. Everyone can find something of interest here. In NPC, you can meet great entertainers, as well as prominent congressmen, politicians and businessmen. The NPC halls keep the memory of the performances of world-famous personalities, such as Jose Carreras, Andrea Bocelli, Montserrat Caballe, Nigel Kennedy and Emir Kusturica.



National Gallery for Foreign Art



The circle of life – mural in the Transfiguration Monastery

The monastery was well-maintained by the kings in the Middle Ages, hence it became a spiritual and cultural center of the country. This is demonstrated by the 1378 Deed of Gift, preserved up until today in the monastery's archive. In the 13th and 14th centuries, the Rila Monastery witnessed the creation of interesting manuscripts, splendid works of wood-carving, murals of high artistic merit and icons.

Big and well-run monasteries in Stara Planina are the Osenovlag Monastery and the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Cherepish Monastery in the Iskar Gorge, the Klisura Monastery near the Petrohan Pass, as well as the St. Trinity Etrropole Monastery. The St. Holy Virgin of Vitosha Dragalevtzi Monastery at the foot of Vitosha and the St. George the Victorious Kremikovtzi Monastery are also very interesting to visit.

The monasteries around Veliko Tarnovo date back to the time of the Second Bulgarian State and have great historical and cultural value. There you can visit the Transfiguration Monastery, the St. Trinity Patriarch Monastery, the St. Michael the Archangel Dryanovo Monastery, the St. Prophet Elias Plakovo Monastery and the Assumption of the Holy Virgin Sokol Monastery.

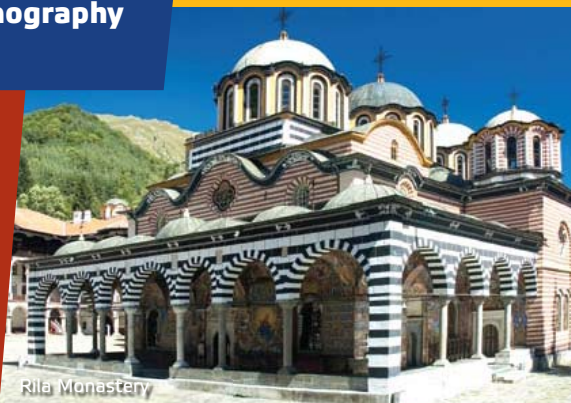
Paragons of Christian art – churches and monasteries. Development of iconography

The conversion in 864-865 established Bulgaria among the European Christian powers. Since their creation, the Christian monuments became centers of Slavic literature and culture.

One of the biggest cultural and historical treasures of Bulgaria are its monasteries. Some of them date back to Byzantine time and have helped to preserve the Bulgarian spirit, while others are built on the site of destroyed cloisters. Some are impressive with their unique architecture, others with their valuable icons and skillfully made murals, and still others with their location in the most picturesque spots of the country.

The biggest and most popular Bulgarian monasteries are the Rila, Bachkovo and Troyan monasteries. Particularly picturesque are also the St. George the Victorious Gloghen Monastery near Teteven and the Birth of the Holy Virgin Rozhen Monastery in the Sandanski and Melnik area.

The Rila Monastery is the biggest and most impressive Bulgarian monastery. It was established in the middle of the 930s by the hermit Ivan Rilski and his followers. Ivan Rilski was one of the first well-known Bulgarian monks and hermits.



Rila Monastery



Bachkovo Monastery

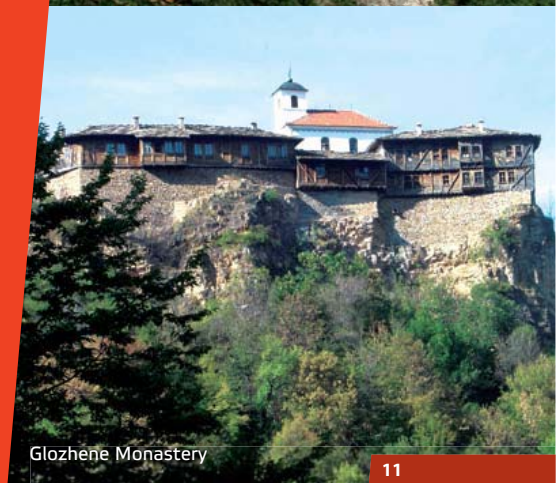
Numerous rock-hewn monasteries are located in North Bulgaria, most of them not functioning, but very interesting. The largest number of monasteries is concentrated along the Rusenski Lom river valley. The Basarbovo Monastery is the only functioning rock-hewn monastery in Bulgaria. The Ivanovo Rock-Hewn Monastery, about 25 km away from the Basarbovo Monastery, is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Another popular rock-hewn monastery is the Aladzha Monastery near the Black Sea resort Golden Sands.

Iconography is closely related to Christianity and found mainly in the Eastern Orthodox world. Bulgarian iconography was born about a century after the conversion to Christianity. The unique icons include the ceramic icons of the Pliska and Veliki Preslav culture, as well as the most famous items from the Second Bulgarian State period, the Holy Virgin Katarigi and St. John the Theologian double-sided icon ("the Poganovo icon") from the 14th century, the Holy Virgin Eleusa, a double-sided icon coming from Nesebar (13th-14th century), the Holy Virgin Hodegetria from Nesebar impressive with its rich silver repoussé cover (kept in the Bachkovo Monastery).

During the period when Bulgaria was part of the Ottoman Empire, iconography, along with Slavic literature and Christianity, helped preserve the national identity. The Revival period witnessed renovation in iconography. The new style was close to popular traditions without conflicting with the genre's traditions. The distinctive features of the Revival iconography include bright, cheerful colors, characters in clothes contemporary to the historical period, frequent depiction of Bulgarian kings and saint patriarchs. Several new schools were born, the schools of Samokov, Tryavna, Debar, and others. Among the prominent iconographers of this period are Zahariy Zograf, Nikola Obrazopisov and Stanislav Dospevski. Contrary to the past, the iconographers of the Revival period were rarely clergymen, which helped to develop a distinctive creative character.



Basarbovo Monastery



Gloghen Monastery

Important cultural landmarks and destinations in Bulgaria

BULGARIA

CULTURAL TOURISM



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- Airport
- Border crossing point
- Harbor

The magic of Bulgarian museum villages and towns

Arbanasi is one of the most picturesque old villages in Bulgaria. It is located on the rocky plateau bearing the same name and presenting a unique view towards the medieval part of the old Bulgarian capital of Veliko Tarnovo. Arbanasi is famous for its distinctive residential architecture and churches abounding in murals. The village was founded in the 13th century by Bulgarian boyars. It gradually developed into a rich trade settlement with more than 1000 houses. The houses are astounding with their rough exterior view and high stone fences that contrast with the pretty inner yards and the unique coziness and comfort of the interior spaces. The ceilings, doors, furniture, and windows are richly decorated with wood-carvings. The walls are adorned with plaster ornaments and are painted with flowers and plant elements.

Especially beautiful are the 7 churches preserved from the 17th century. With their high solid outer walls, small windows and unbreakable iron-clad oak doors, they are in harmony with the general architectural appearance of the village. Almost devoid of external decorations, the churches are richly painted and adorned with incredibly beautiful wood-carvings on the inside.



A potter



Arbanasi

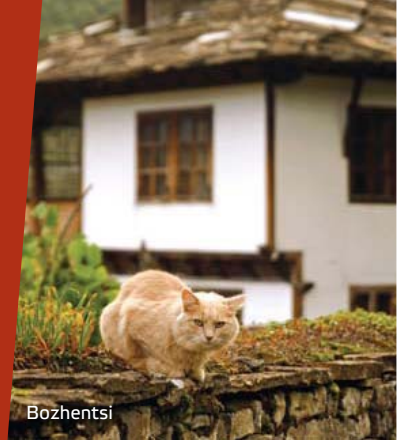


St. Trinity Church in Bansko

Bansko is a pretty mountain town located at the foot of the Pirin Mountain at an altitude of 925 m. It is famous for its original and distinctive architecture, picturesque two-storey stone houses and flower gardens, as well as an iconography and a wood-carving school, and a local cuisine. In the mid-18th century Bansko was a large and rich settlement with well-developed crafts, trade and arts. This period witnessed the establishment of the Bansko art school that became famous across the Balkans and Central Europe. Monuments made by these fantastic craftsmen remain in many Bulgarian cities. Today, the city is well-known for the heavenly beauty of Pirin, as well as for its numerous hotels and taverns and its wonderful conditions for summer and winter tourism. The unique hospitality of local citizens and the splendid traditional Pirin songs attract fans from all over the world.

Bozhentsi is a small village, a monument of Bulgarian architecture from the Revival period huddled on the North flanks of Central Stara Planina.

The houses are few in number and are built on both banks of the Bozhanka River that rises not far from the village. After becoming rich through stock-breeding, crafts and trade during the 18th century, the village changed its architectural image. The hilly terrain allowed the craftsmen of Bozhentsi to shape one of the most picturesque architectural composition. The high stone fences, the forged oak gates, the narrow cobblestone streets, the stone taps and bridges and the small shops all have the unique feel of this Bulgarian heavenly spot. Everyone can find peace and quiet here by being carried away back to a world long gone. Today, Bozhentsi hosts a number of well-known Bulgarian writers, artists, architects, science and culture figures.



Bozhentsi



Lazar's Day feast



Etara Ethnographic Compound

Etara is an impressive open-air ethnographic museum. It is located in the quarter of the city of Gabrovo bearing the same name, on the bank of the Sivek River, on the North flanks of Central Stara Planina. It occupies a total area of 60 decares.

The exposition shows before visitors (with the participation of craftsmen and animators) the architecture, ethnography, folklore, ancient crafts, traditional cuisine, home arrangement and clothing of the Gabrovo region in the 18th and 19th centuries. Taps, bridges, buildings, equipment and appliances are preserved or transported here from other neighboring villages. They reveal in an interesting and entertaining manner the progressiveness, resourcefulness and high artistic skills of Gabrovo's citizens from the past.

Zheravna is also an architectural and ethnographic reserve with more than 150 houses, a candle-works, a small school, a nunnery, a church, taps, inns and shops preserved from the Revival period. The village is located on the South-Eastern flanks of Eastern Stara Planina and was found between the 12th and the 14th century.

It gradually became rich by developing crafts, stock-breeding and trade. The distinctive format of a Zheravna house was formed, built entirely of roughly processed oak with eaves up to 2 m deep and wooden window shutters. The exterior of the houses not always shows the interior abundance of forms and details and in particular the wood-carvings and appliques on the room's walls, doors, windows and furniture. Houses, churches, and schools have been preserved and turned into museums today. Zheravna is one of the most attractive Bulgarian locations.



A house in Zheravna

The town of Melnik is a museum and a historical town; it is the smallest town in Bulgaria. Here you can enter the past watching the picturesque small houses with tiled roofs, narrow streets and stone roads. Cozy hotels, pubs offering traditional Bulgarian cuisine, wine cellars and souvenir shops - this is what Melnik provides today.

The red wine you will taste will make you doubt that real wine can only be found in France. Melnik wine has rich taste and aroma. The wineries are well-known far beyond the borders of Bulgaria. Wine production has been developed here for hundreds of years and its secrets are passed from one generation to the next. The climate is suitable for growing different grape varieties. One of the unique varieties of the town is the „Wide Melnik“.

The town's landmarks also include the Pashov house (the Town National Museum), the Kordopulov house (a private museum with a wine cellar) and the remains of medieval churches. The Rozhen Monastery, one of the several medieval monasteries preserved in relatively good condition up until today, is located in the vicinity of the town. You also won't be left untouched by the incredible natural environment of the Pirin region and the Melnik sand pyramids, a unique miracle carved by nature.



Melnik



Koprivshitsa



A wood-carved ceiling in Tryavna

Koprivshitsa is unique with its nature, endowing with abundant vitality with its history preserved for centuries and its matchless cultural monuments. More than 380 architectural and historical monuments are preserved here, part of the Bulgarian cultural heritage.

The rich history and the preserved popular customs and folklore are the reason why today this beautiful place attracts more and more visitors.

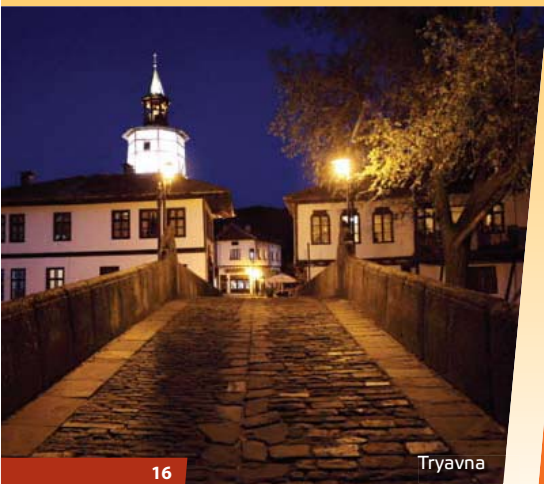
Koprivshitsa is an ideal location for a quiet vacation. The town is full of small family hotels with the typical Koprivshitsa home arrangement and perfectly maintained yards, flecked with multiple flowers. You will be impressed by the quietness and the clear mountain air. The town has a number of landmarks that attract attention and inspire poets, artists and singers. Here you can see multiple stone works of art, such as tombstones, sculptures, busts bridges and taps. Every work of art among these is a masterpiece itself. However, most fascinating are the old houses of prominent Bulgarian historical figures, which have been transformed into museums today. Every year, at the end of the summer, Koprivshitsa hosts the traditional National Bulgarian Folklore Fair with more than 10,000 musicians, singers and dancers participating in it.



Leshten



Zlatograd



Tryavna



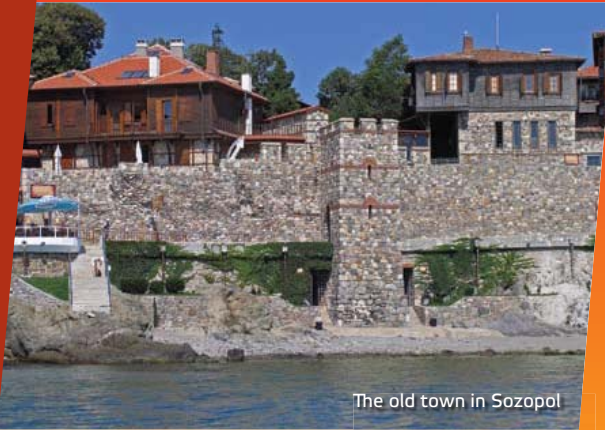
View of Sozopol

Sozopol is the oldest town along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast and one of the most popular Bulgarian resorts. The central part (the Old Town) is located on a small peninsula. Nearby are the St. Ivan and St. Peter islands.

The first settlement at this site was established in the end of the 4th-3rd millennium BC. The underwater explorations in Sozopol's harbor revealed housing remains, ceramic vessels, and stone and bone working tools from the Bronze Age. Numerous stone anchors and stocks dating from the 2nd-1st millennium BC have also been discovered in the Sozopol bay. There is evidence of active maritime traffic since deepest antiquity. Later, the town became a Hellenic colony, Apollonia Pontica, named after the god Apollo. The town developed into an important trade and harbor center.

Wooden and stone churches and numerous houses from the 18th and the 19th century are preserved, shaping the unique architectural image of contemporary Sozopol. Ancient icons and magnificent wood-carved iconostases represent the remarkable achievements of artistic crafts at the time.

During archeological excavations on St. Ivan Island in the summer of 2010, a reliquary was discovered and instigated a genuine sensation. It contained relics – small bones of a hand, a facial part, and a tooth of the saint. Following an experts' examination it was confirmed that the relics belong to St. John the Forerunner himself. Precisely a part of the skull and one hand of St. John the Baptist were kept in the Patriarchate of Constantinople and were moved to Sozopol during the Ottoman raids. Today, the relics are placed in the St. George Church in Sozopol, which possesses other first-rate Christian relics as well, a small part of the True Cross and relics of St. Andrew.



The old town in Sozopol

Nesebar is one of the biggest historical depositories and for that reason is declared a museum town, as well as an architectural and archeological reserve of national significance. Due to the numerous well-preserved monuments from different ages, the old town of Nesebar is a cultural monument included in the UNESCO World Heritage List.

The town is one of the oldest in Europe and the most abundant with medieval architectural monuments in Bulgaria. It inherits an ancient Thracian settlement established in the 2nd millennium BC.

The town is declared an architectural and archeological reserve due to its unique appearance and the specific ambiance of its streets. The biggest wealth of the town are the nearly 60 preserved houses from the Revival period that give it an exceptionally romantic atmosphere, as well as the more than 40 churches. 23 of the churches were discovered during excavations and were subsequently restored. Currently, only one is functioning, while the others have been turned into art galleries and museums.



Christ Pantocrator Church in Nesebar



Nesebar



Nesebar



Plovdiv's Ethnographic Museum



Plovdiv

The unique cultural and historical heritage of Plovdiv includes three main periods – the Antiquity, the Middle Ages and the Revival. Every period is represented by significant tourist landmarks in the city. They can take you on a journey to the mysterious past rekindling your curiosity to find contemporary adventures.

In the 12th century BC, the prehistoric settlement developed into the ancient Thracian city of Eumolpias, which is one of the first city centers in South-Eastern Europe. The remains of Eumolpias can be seen to this day. Plovdiv has the second largest population in Bulgaria.



The Ancient Theatre

The Old Plovdiv



Numerous economic and cultural events take place in the city, including the International Fair, the Stage at a Crossroad International Theatre Festival and the Golden Chest Television Festival. A number of ancient monuments are preserved in the city, such as the Ancient Theatre, the Roman Odeon, the Agora (the Roman Forum), the Roman Stadium, the Eyrene building from the late Antiquity, etc.

The Old Plovdiv is a unique city structure comprising of archeological sites, galleries with valuable exhibits, ancient buildings, functioning temples with rich paint and wood-carving decorations, cozy cafes and restaurants, old and new houses with romantic yards and picturesque cobblestone streets. The city is a winner of the European gold medal for preserving its ancient monuments.

Traditional crafts and holidays

Bulgaria has preserved the vitality of its folklore up until today. The distinctive traditional crafts, songs, dances and costumes are the best way to get in touch with the local folklore and traditions. The Bulgarian crafts were in their heyday at the end of the 19th century. The most common were weaving, ceramic item making as well as making of decorations and clothing. Especially popular were the folk costumes that are a work of art, together with the traditional sandals. Wood-carving was widely applied not only to make household items, but also for decorations, including decoration of iconostases. Other Bulgarian crafts include pottery-making, making of rugs and bags out of goat fur and leather-working.

Among the most interesting participants in the traditional holidays are the so-called „Kukeri“. They are carnival personages dressed as beasts or other characters, always wearing masks and often cow-bells on their belts and coats with their fur inside out. A gathering of the kukeri is organized on the 1st of January, during the New Year celebrations. Young and old people dress in folk costumes, put on masks and start to chase away the evil spirits. The games and customs of the kukeri are performed by males only, most of them bachelors. Every group of kukeri has a leader who is the only married man, i. e. a householder with an established social status. In Eastern Bulgaria you will know the leaders by their bride and groom costumes. In the other parts of Bulgaria the leaders are dressed in goat, sheep, or roe skins, with leather masks on their heads, or with faces covered in soot.



A wine festival



A Bulgarian folklore festival

It is thought that the most ancient masks are the ones depicting a ram, a goat and a bull. The impression made by the masked kukeri is enhanced by the sound of the copper and bronze bells hanging from their costumes.

The Surva international gathering of the kukeri in the city of Pernik is the most famous one, with guests from all over the world coming to experience the performance's magic; to see and touch the masks, to feel rejuvenated, to make their wish for good health and good luck.

Another national holiday related to Bulgarian folklore is the Baba Marta custom. According to folk beliefs, Baba Marta is a mythical character whose name is related to the name of the month of March. Baba Marta is accompanied by various rituals dedicated to the spring's arrival.

The most famous custom related to Baba Marta is that everybody in the country is decorating themselves with a martenitsa (made of twisted white and red threads) on the 1st of March. It is believed that the custom of tying a martenitsa originates from the ancient Bulgarians, whose khans used to decorate their fellow tribesmen with a martenitsa for strength in battle, good health and long life.

One of the most mystic and impressive traditional rituals is fire dancing. Fire dancing is an ancient Bulgarian and Greek custom consisting of people dancing barefoot over burning charcoal. The custom is preserved in its authentic form in the village of Balgari situated in the Strandzha Mountain, but it can be also found in other Bulgarian villages.

The fire dancers perform in the evening of St. Constantine and Helena's day. On that day, three adolescents take the icons to the sacred spring near the village along with a procession led by the fire dancers. All inhabitants participate in the procession. The icons are sanctified and a horo dance is performed, accompanied by drums and bagpipes.



A martenitsa



Fire dancing



Rose picking

The procession walks through the entire village and the fire dancers go to a chapel. They remain there until the evening, listening to the constant beating of a drum in a specific rhythm that makes them enter a trance stage after which they start dancing. A fire is lit on the square and is maintained all day. At dusk, the fire is spread out to uncover the burning charcoals. The oldest fire dancers step over the burning charcoals first, circling around them three times beforehand, and then passing through them crosswise. After that, the real dance begins, the fire dancers step into the ring of fire with a shrill cry. While dancing, they are holding the icon of St. Constantine and Helena which is decorated with flowers. What is remarkable is that after the ritual, the fire dancers have no wounds or burns on their feet. This represents the greatest magic of fire dancing.

Another interesting event with fans all over the world is the Rose Holiday. It is traditionally organized during the first national holidays of June in the city of Kazanlak, a center of rose growing and processing. The festivities open with the rituals of rose picking and rose brewing performed by girls in multicolored folk costumes. The feast unravels with a festival procession from the rose gardens to the central square, where the „Queen of Roses“, the most beautiful girl of the year, is selected with a contest. Wearing a rose wreath and showered with flowers, she welcomes the guests that came for the feast. Then a bright-colored and cheerful celebration with a lot of singing and dancing begins. The folklore part of the feast ends with a horo dance.

Cultural life and arts today

Bulgarian cultural life is influenced by worldwide trends. New forms, relevant to the present day, are presented on the art scene here. Among these are Sofia Design Week, Sofia Dance Week and Sofia Architecture Week, international events that show the works of world-famous artists, designers and architects on a Bulgarian stage.

The Bulgarian theatres' repertoire is very diverse. The Varna Summer International Theatre Festival, the Cinemania Film Festival and Sofia's International Film Festival attract theatre and movie fans from all over the world. The capital of Sofia hosts the best-known Bulgarian theatres that regularly stage the biggest authors, including the Aleko Konstantinov National Satirical Theatre, the Ivan Vazov National Theatre, the Tear and Laughter National Dramatic Theatre, the Nikolay Binev Youth Theatre, the Bulgarian Army Theatre and many others. All major cities have city theatres where you can enjoy the performance of local actors.

The Bulgarian galleries and museums provide the audience with regular expositions and guest exhibitions that can introduce you to the rich historical past of these lands. There you will also find symbols of modern art such as performance arts, installations and fashion shows. The richest collections can be found in the National Gallery for Foreign Art, the National Art Gallery, the Sofia Art Gallery, the National Museum of History, the National Archeological Institute with the Museum of the Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, and many other smaller and private galleries scattered around the streets of the major cities. Annual cultural events and festivals with fans from all over the world are also organized in Bulgaria.



Ivan Vazov National Theatre in Sofia



Bansko Jazz Festival

Among the most famous is the Apollonia Festival of Arts in the town of Sozopol. Stars from all art scenes meet there every year at the end of the summer. During one entire week, the town hosts musicians, actors, directors, producers, artists, poets and writers. Their talent and high level of professionalism turn the days and evenings in Sozopol into a genuine festivity. Evidence for that is the amount of audience that overflows the festival's halls and the town's streets.

Among the significant music festivals are also the Lovech Party Fest, the Bagpipe Playing Competition in the Rhodope's village of Gela, the Kaliakra Rock Fest, Spirit of Burgas, Burgas and the Sea, the Bansko International Jazz Fest, and many others. Their diversity will allow you to choose among all music styles, from the magic of local folklore and jazz sessions to the performance of prominent performers in rock music.



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GENERAL INFO ABOUT BULGARIA

Geographic location: Republic of Bulgaria is a European country, located in the Eastern part of the Balkan peninsula. Its Eastern boundary is the Black Sea; Greece and Turkey are situated southbound, its Western neighbours are The Republic of Macedonia and The Republic of Serbia, and to the North it shares border with The Republic of Romania.

Climate: Bulgaria has a mixed Mild-Continental and Mediterranean influenced climate.

Average winter temperatures: 0 °C to -2 °C

Average summer temperatures: 20-22 °C

Territory: 110,099 sq. km

Population: 7 679 290

Official language: Bulgarian

Capital: Sofia

Average height above sea level: 470 m

Highest point: summit Musala (2925 m)

Time zone: GMT+2 (EST+7)

Main denomination: East-orthodox Christianity (82,6 % of the population)

Other denominations: Islam (1,2 % of the population), Catholicism (0,6 % of the population), Protestants (0,5% of the population)

Ethnic groups: Bulgarians (83,9 %), Turks (9,4 %), Gypsies (4,7 %), others (2 %) (All data is from survey made in 2001)

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OPPORTUNITIES THROUGHOUT THE WHOLE YEAR

