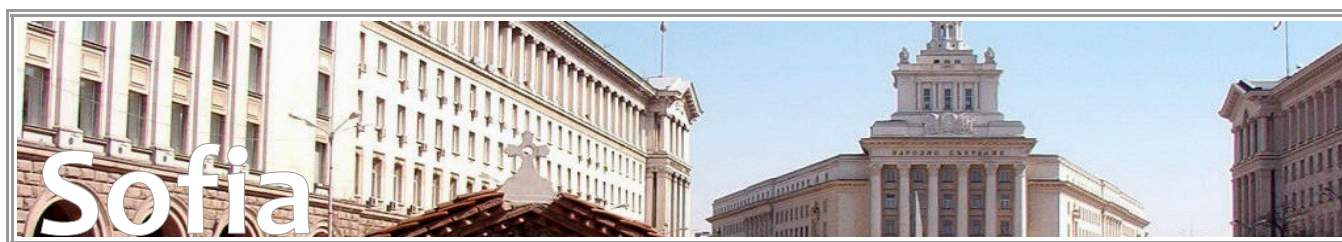


With an area of 42,854 square miles and a population of 8.4 million, Bulgaria is one of the smallest countries in the Old continent, but due to its geographical position on the crossroads between the West and the East, Bulgaria has played a significant role in the region of the Balkan Peninsula and Europe.

Bulgaria is a country with thousands of years of history and a cultural heritage that embraces ancient civilizations. Visitors will find much to interest them in the country's history, culture, ethnography, religion, architecture and the arts. Unique archaeological sites abound throughout the country – ancient settlement mounds from the Neolithic age, Thracian sanctuaries and tombs, remains of Roman cities, Byzantine and Medieval fortresses, architectural reserves, ethnographic complexes, churches and monasteries, Tekkes (mosques) and many others.

Despite the fact that it occupies only 2% of Europe's territory, about 40,000 historical monuments have been registered in Bulgaria (7 of which are included in the UNESCO list of world cultural heritage sites), 36 cultural reserves, 160 monasteries, and roughly 330 museums and galleries. This includes prehistoric finds, Thracian tombs, sites from the Greek Age, Roman fortresses, historical monuments from the time of the First and the Second Bulgarian Kingdoms, and architectural landmarks from the Age of Revival.

Emblematic for Bulgaria are the monuments included in the UNESCO List: the Kazanlak Tomb (4th – 3rd century BC), the Thracian Tomb by the village of Sveshtari near Razgrad (3rd century BC), the Madara Horseman (8th century), the Boyana Church (10th – 11th century), the Ivanovo Rock Churches near Ruse (10th – 14th century), the Rila Monastery (10th century), the Old Town in Nesebar.



Sofia is Bulgaria's capital and its largest city. Founded thousands of years ago, today the city continues to develop as the country's cultural and economic center. At present, the city has a population of 1,250,000. The city is located at a strategic crossroads. The route from Western Europe to Istanbul passes through Sofia via Beograd and Skopje, then through Plovdiv to Turkey. Sofia also connects The Near East and The Middle East, lying between the banks of The Danube and the shores of The White Sea on the one hand, and between The Black Sea and The Adriatic on the other.

Sofia has been settled for many millennia. In honor of its hot springs, in the 8th century BCE the Thracian tribes settled here gave the city its first name – Serdika or Serdonopolis. In the 1st century BCE, Serdika was captured by the Romans, who transformed it into a Roman city. During the reign of Emperor Marcus Ulpius Trajan (reign 98-117 CE), the city took his name, Ulpia Serdika, and became the administrative center of the region. Serdika was the favorite city of Constantine the Great (reign 306-337), who said "Serdika is my Rome." In roughly 175, massive fortified walls, with four watchtowers were built

to protect the city, and a second outer fortified wall was added during the 5th-6th centuries. The city's flourished for a second time under Justinian the Great (reign 527-565). At the beginning of the 9th century, the Bulgarian Khan Krum invaded Serdika. The city became an inseparable part of The First Bulgarian Empire (7th-9th centuries) under Khan Omurtag. At this time the city was renamed Sredets. From 1018-1094, Sredets was under Byzantine rule, but still remained an important strategic, economic, and cultural center. During the time of The Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1393), Sredets took on the appearance of a large Medieval city – its narrow, crowded streets witnessed the construction of more and more small churches and monasteries, which later became Sofia's Holy Mountain. Sofia preserves many valuable monuments to its long and storied past. Visitors exploring the city's streets can see remnants of The Eastern Gate from the days when Sofia was Serdika and Sredets, dating from the 2nd-4th centuries CE. These remains are exhibited in the underpass connecting the Presidential Palace and The Ministerial Council, surrounded by shops selling traditional Bulgarian souvenirs and rosewater.



The eight-millennium long history of Plovdiv gives it the right to be considered a contemporary of early human civilizations and one of the most ancient towns in Europe. During the 2nd century AD, Lucian said about it: "This is one of the most beautiful towns you can imagine. Its beauty shines from far away. And the great river Hebros passes at the foot of the hills..." Brilliant antiquity, middle ages with elements of the Orient. Revival and Baroque combine with the folklore tradition to give the key-note to today's town center. The town is a crossing point of cultures, epochs, religions, and a crossing point of roads connecting countries and continents. Plovdiv was first declared a town by Philip of Macedonia who gave it the name Philipopolis. During Roman rule the illustrious town had the right to mint its own coins. Later, Emperor Traian named it Ulpia Trimontium.

Plovdiv, the second largest city in Bulgaria, situated along the two banks of the river Maritsa, lies in the largest, the warmest and the most fertile lowland in the whole Balkan Peninsula. The climate here is extremely favorable: spring comes early; summer is warm and lasts long, while winter is very mild. In Plovdiv you are always surrounded by the hills, decorated with greenery and old-time houses. The group of three hills consisting of Nebet Tepe, Taxim Tepe, and Dzhabaz Tepe. On the highest hill - the Bounardzhika

Park, are the monuments to the Russian liberators. Among the landmarks outside of the old town is the Archeological museum, which is second only after the museum in Sofia for its collections and exhibitions. Collective finds of gold, silver, copper and bronze coins are displayed in the rare coin department. The famous gold treasure of Panagyurishte is also exhibited here. The Ethnographic museum, the Revival museum, the Science museum and the remains of the Roman Forum between the Trimontium Hotel and the Central Post Office are not less interesting to visit. The cultural life of Plovdiv is active and various throughout the year. Prestigious international festivals are organized in the city.

The neighborhoods of Plovdiv are interesting and preferred places to visit as well. Here, one can find famous natural as well as historic and cultural sites like the hot spring spas in Hisarya, the Narechen baths, the Medieval Assenova fortress, the Bachkovo monastery, the Arapovski monastery and numerous other places of interest. For sport and exercise enthusiasts there are many locations available to enjoy them. A unique sports complex including a stadium, a rowing complex (the largest one in the Balkans), indoor and outdoor swimming pools, tennis courts and an athletics track are located in the northeastern part of the city.



Varna is the third largest city of Bulgaria after Sofia and Plovdiv. However, in the summer it becomes the queen of the country in terms of tourist flow. Varna is located in the middle of the bay, between lakes Varna and Beloslav, which define its boundaries. The old town is developed around a long pedestrian street overlooked by old houses and modern buildings. There are numerous narrow streets that reach small squares or the wonderful park near the beach. The first settlement in the historical period is of Thracian origin. In the VI century BC settlers and farmers from the city of Miletus founded the Greek city of Odessos, conquered two centuries later (IV century BC) by the armies of Alexander the Great. The Macedonians give the city an high degree of autonomy with a special status. In the I millennium BC it was conquered by the legions of Marcus Lucullus. With the Romans the city quickly became

the most important administrative center on the Black Sea coast.

During this time, Odessos housed the great poet Ovid. After the barbarian invasions it fell under Byzantine control. The first mention with its present name was in the IX century. In the XIII century it was annexed to the kingdom of the Bulgarian King Kaloyan. A powerful defensive system, based on three strongholds around the city core, was developed. The town was conquered by the Turks in 1391 and a period of serious decline began. In 1444 the city was under siege from the Crusaders of the Polish King Vladyslav Jagiello and Hungarian Janos Hunyadi III. However, the siege failed and King Vladislav died during the battle. Over the centuries the city gained oriental character: many mosques, "Konak" (Ottoman administrative buildings) and Turkish baths were built, and

it was strictly forbidden to build churches. The town became a stronghold of the northern area of the Ottoman Empire and an important commercial and production center. In 1828 it was administered by the Russians for a short period. It regained its freedom in 1878 and thanks to the Sofia - Varna railway line opened in 1897, the city quickly became the main port on the Bulgarian Black Sea: in a few years many companies involved in fishing, opened.

In subsequent years Varna became an important tourist center and was enriched with exquisite palaces and clubs for fun and relaxation. From the end of WWII to 1956 it was named Stalin.

Now Varna is the leader of national tourism associated with the most famous seaside resorts of the Black Sea. Maritime activities are a very important part of the local economy.



Nessebar was founded more than 3.000 years ago by the Thracians. This city is undoubtedly one of the most beautiful and rich in history of the entire Black Sea coast. Situated on a small peninsula, it is famous for its ancient churches. In the Middle Ages there were over 40, but now those deserve a visit are about a dozen. There are also traditional wooden buildings dating from the early XVII to late XIX centuries.

Along the historical route there are many shops selling souvenirs and local products, and it is easy to see impromptu exhibitions of paintings and icons in the summer. Since 1983, the town has been included in the UNESCO list.

The Thracians established a settlement called Melsambria. In the VI century BC the Greek community of Megara (Attica) founded the city-state of Messambria.

The port was connected with the others of the Aegean Sea and Mediterranean. In the V century BC the Greeks founded the city of Navlohos (near the current Obzor), and the area between Mesembria and Navlohos became the

most important center of agricultural production of the coast. It was able to provide the markets of both cities and those of the other colonies of the Black Sea. In the I century, after a long siege, the city surrendered to the Roman legions of Marcus Lucullus. From the IX century it was conquered by the Byzantines and then the Bulgarians. During the reign of the Bulgarian Tsar Alexander the town reached the highest political and cultural development: over 40 churches were built in the peninsula and Nessebar expanded its control for many kilometers in the hinterland.

In 1366 it was conquered by Amedeo di Savoia and sold to the Byzantines. The Ottoman rule was a long period of economic and cultural decline for the town: during the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-78, Nessebar was more than a fishing village. In the XX century it underwent numerous changes and expansions, but retained the old center. Today it is one of the most popular resorts of the Black Sea coast.



The town was founded in the XIV century. In the XVII century the work of local artisans was so popular that it was sold all over the Ottoman Empire. Despite the destruction caused by the Kardjali (the irregular Turkish militias) the city continued to grow and reached its zenith in the XIX century. In these years, the city was enriched with beautiful houses decorated with frescoes and inlaid wooden structures, fountains, new public buildings and churches. In 1837 the first independent school of Bulgaria was opened in the town.

During the uprising in April 1876, Koprivshtitsa was one of

the most active centers of revolutionaries. On April 20 the first gun shot of the rebellion was fired in the city. After the defeat, thanks to the rich merchants who paid the Turkish Authorities, the town was spared from the massacres and destruction that occurred in other areas of the country.

Koprivshtitsa was liberated from the Turks in 1878. Today Koprivshtitsa is one of the most important architectural heritage areas of Bulgaria. It preserves about 400 well preserved buildings dating from the Bulgarian Renaissance (XIX century).



This is the most impressive monastery compound in the country, whose architectural and artistic magnificence has earned it a due place in the List of the world cultural and natural heritage, under UNESCO protection.

Founded during the 10th century, the monastery underwent different stages of construction. Its founder is believed to have been Ivan Rislki (John of Rila), the outstanding Bulgarian hermit and healer, a patron saint of the Bulgarian people. Together with his disciples and followers, he established a community of monks, the core of the Rila Monastery. Rebuilt, deserted, reduced to ashes by Turks and built anew, the monastery has been a witness and the symbol of the rich Bulgarian history.

From the outside, the monastery has a harsh and inaccessible appearance of an emphatically defensive character. Inside, however, the architecture of courtyard facades is attractive, varied and enlivened by the multitude of staircases, arcades and roofed balconies. A specific artistic emphasis in the architectural ensemble of the monastery is Hrel'yo's Tower - the only structure preserved from the old buildings. It was put up in 1335 by Sebastocrator Hrel'yo in the monastery courtyard, with the purpose to serve as a defense tower. The fortification style of its architecture is softened by the decorations made out of bricks. It is 75 feet high, its walls being 6 feet thick. In the inside, the space of the tower is distributed into a ground floor with a suspended vault and five stories with wooden floors. On the top story of the tower there is a chapel, elaborately decorated by mural paintings. Access to the different levels is by stone stairs built into the walls. Later, the monks built a small annex to the tower.

A big fire destroyed most of the newly built structures in 1833. During the following year, donations arrived from all over the country for the rebuilding of the monastery and in 1834 the monastery wings were restored and completed in

the appearance we can see them today. In 1847 master builder Milenko from Radomir completed the south wing. The wings have more than 300 monk cells, four chapels and numerous guest rooms, warehouses, etc. Murals and woodcarvings decorate the facades and the walls in the interior. In some of the rooms, known as the Koprivishtitsa, Chiprovtsi and others, there are strikingly beautiful wood-carved ceilings.

One of the most original structures of the Bulgarian National Revival Period is the monastery church of the Holy Virgin (1834). It was built by master builder Pavel Ivanovich from the village of Krimin, Kostur region. It rises on the site of the old church from the time of Sebastocrator Hrel'yo, which had been pulled down by the monks after the big fire of 1833. What has survived from that church includes the altar gates and the ruler's throne of Hrel'yo – extremely valuable monuments of the Bulgarian art of woodcarving. Two icons have also been preserved. They are considered to be masterpieces of medieval Bulgarian painting – that of St Ivan Rilski from the 14th century and of St Arseni. The construction of the present-day five-domed church was completed in 1838 and during the following 23 years it was decorated by woodcarvings and mural paintings. The plan and the interior of the church are extremely rich.

The monastery has a museum exhibition, an art gallery, a library and an ethnographic exhibition, housing icons, manuscripts, certificates and old-time weapons, belonging to the monastery sentries, numerous pieces of jewelry, coins, and church plate. Of great interest is Rafail's cross, an undisputed masterpiece of the art of woodcarving. Monk Rafail continued his work on it in the course of 12 years. He lost his sight on completion of his unique piece of art. It is made of once piece of wood, sized 81 by 43cm, and features 650 small figurines and 104 biblical scenes.

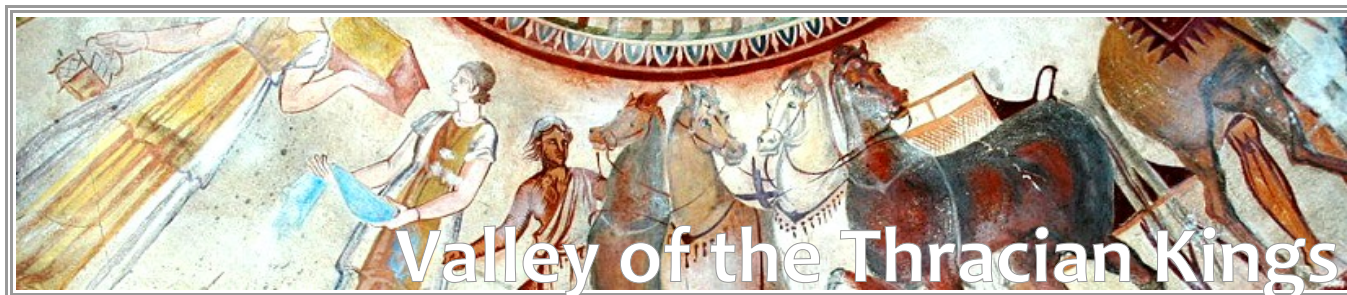


This is a medieval church, whose mural paintings, dated to 1259, are among the masterpieces of European medieval painting. Its frescoes have been characterized as a forerunner of the proto-Renaissance in Italy. In 1979 the Boyana Church was included in the List of the world cultural and natural heritage under UNESCO protection.

The extraordinary popularity of the Boyana Church is due to its 13th century mural paintings, which have been almost completely preserved from that time. It becomes clear from the donor's inscription on the north wall of the narthex that the church murals had been painted during the reign of Tsar Konstantin Tih Assen in 1259. Of special

interest are the characters of the donor – Sebastocrator Kaloyan - and his young wife Desislava, painted with a keen psychological insight. They can be seen on the eastern end of the north wall facing the patron St Nicholas, to whom Kaloyan is presenting a scale model of the church. Just opposite them are the likenesses of Tsar Konstantin Tih Assen and Queen Laskarina, depicted with no less feeling and skill. The inspired images of well-known monks and female saints are painted on the rest of the walls. Appearing here for the first time in art is the image of St

Ivan Rilski (John of Rila) (9th - 10th century) the saint and divine patron of the Bulgarian people. The moving beauty of the mural paintings is an eloquent proof of the skill of the anonymous mural painter, generally known as the Boyana Master Painter, showing alongside the established tradition a new, personal and different world outlook. What has been created in the Boyana Church marks a culmination in Bulgarian medieval mural painting and reveals to the world the achievements of the Bulgarian creative genius.



This is a region of Thracian burial mounds, to be found in the valley of Kazanluk. Apart from the famous Kazanluk tomb and the tombs at the villages of Krun, Muglizh, the Koprinka Dam and many others, the archaeological excavations in the region in 1992-1997 brought to light new sites under the mounds – the Zapryanova, Malkata (Small), Golyama (Big) Arsenalka, Ostrousha, Helvetsia, Shoushmanets, Sarafova, Sashova, Slavchova, the Mound of Gryphons, the Mound near the village of Gabarevo. The unearthed archaeological monuments are unique showing the development of Thracian culture (architecture) between the 5th and the 4th century B.C.

An original Thracian tomb (UNESCO) from 4th – 3rd century BC is situated in the Tyulbeto park – Kazanlak city. It is known as the Kazanlak Tomb. It is under a special

storage regime. Its duplicate, constructed in scale 1:1, which presents the architecture, the archaeological materials and the wall-paintings of the Kazanlak Tomb, is situated next to it. This Tomb is one of the most significant monuments of the Thracian culture in the Bulgarian lands, included in the list of the global cultural inheritance of UNESCO in 1979.

The tomb was accidentally found in 1944 in the north-east region of Kazanlak, and it is a significant monument of the Thracian art from the early Hellenistic age.

The monument owes its global fame to the remarkable wall-paintings in the corridor and the dome premise – one of the best preserved products of the antique painting from the early Hellenistic age. The unknown painter had worked in four basic colors: black, red, yellow and white.



This monastery, located in the picturesque valley of the river Chepelare (known as Chaya) about 30 km to south of Plovdiv, is the second for importance in Bulgaria. The complex was founded in 1083 by the Georgian brothers Grigorii and Abazii Bakuriani (two officers of the Byzantine army). The monastery was rebuilt and enlarged during the XVII and XIX centuries. The complex is known with its original architectural form and its series of frescoes which cover the walls of the monastery and the three churches: the Church of the Ossuary dedicated to the Holy Trinity, the Church of the Assumption (1604) and that of St. Nicholas (1840). The oldest paintings are those of the Church of the Ossuary dating to the XI century.

Among the numerous images, the figure of the ancient Bulgarian Emperor Ivan Alexander could be recognized (he was one of the benefactors of the monastery). Inside the Church of St. Nicholas, there are some of the early works of the master Zachary Zograf considered one the most famous artists of the Bulgarian Revival. In Judgement, the artist was depicted between some famous local personalities of the XIX century. The monastery keeps precious medieval manuscripts, collections of antique jewelries and several icons, including the famous Holy Mary made in Georgia in XIV century. The procession with the image of the Madonna, is carried in August and 25 days after Orthodox Easter.



Bulgarian cuisine is exceptionally diverse and delicious, consisting of various salads, breadstuffs, stews, and other local dishes. Many of the dishes are prepared according to traditional recipes handed down from generation to generation over the centuries.

The most products for which Bulgaria is internationally known are yogurt and white brine (feta) cheese. These are almost always present on Bulgarian tables in one form or another. One of the most famous and most popular breakfast items in the country is banitsa. It is made of dough with various fillings, such as cheese, spinach, rice, and meat.

Other popular breakfast dishes include pancakes, buhtas (fritters), mekitsas (fried dough pieces), and fried bread slices. All of these are particularly delicious when served with jam, marmalade, honey or Bulgarian yogurt.

People in rural areas grow vegetables that are exceptionally tasty, which is why salads occupy a central place in our culinary tradition. The most popular Bulgarian salad is the Shopska Salad, but there are also other salads worth trying – Shepherd's Salad, Harvest Salad, Snezhanka, Monk's Salad, Dobrudzha Salad, Roasted Peppers Salad, and many others. Soups and broths are also popular in the countryside.

Some of the most popular Bulgarian dishes are grilled – meat balls, kebapches, grilled meat pieces, grilled sausages, and others. Various stews and dishes in clay pots are also a regular part of the Bulgaria cuisine (hotchpotch and casseroles). These include Chomlek, Kavarma, and Kapama (in the Bansko region).

Potatoes are a main ingredient in many Bulgarian recipes. The most popular potato dishes include Ogreten (au gratin), Patatnik (in the Rhodope region), potato stew, and fried potatoes. Such delicacies are usually accompanied with a Bulgarian wine, since Bulgaria is justly famous for its wines. Thanks to the country's unique climate and soils, a variety of grapes thrive here – Gamza (North Bulgaria), the Wide Melnik Vine (in the region of Melnik and Sandanski), Dimyat (in the regions of Varna, Shumen and Stara Zagora), Mavrud (Plovdiv, Pazardzhik, Asenovgrad), Red Misket (Straldzha and Sungurlare), Ruby (Plovdiv and Septemvri) and Pamid (Pazardzhik, Plovdiv). Another very popular Bulgarian spirit is Rakia. It is made of grapes or other fruits – plums (in the region of the town of Troyan, Teteven), apricots (in the region of Tutrakan, Silistra, Dobrich), figs, pears, and others. A rose rakia is distilled in the Valley of Roses (in the region of Karlovo and Kazanlak), since this is the home of Bulgaria's oil-yielding roses.



1. Do I need a visa to enter Bulgaria? For residents of the EU and the USA, no visa is required for up to a 90-day stay in Bulgaria. For information about other countries, see the following site: www.mfa.bg/en/pages/view/85

2. Is the use of credit cards wide spread? In large stores, hotels, and catering and entertainment establishments, the following credit cards are generally accepted: Visa, MasterCard, American Express and Diners Club. In smaller stores, hotels, and catering and entertainment establishments, it is necessary to pay in cash.

3. What currency is used for daily transactions in the country? At present, only BGN (lev) is accepted. The official currency of the country is the lev, which is equal to 100 stotinki).

4. Which are the mobile operators in the country Vivacom, Globul and Mtel. They cover the entire territory of the country. They maintain 2G and 3G networks and GSM 900/1800.

5. What is the country's emergency telephone number? 112

6. Bulgaria is located in which time zone?

Bulgaria is located in the Eastern European Time Zone, which is GMT (Greenwich Mean Time) +2 hours.

7. What is the electric voltage in the country? 220 V, 50 Hz.

8. What is the climate in Bulgaria? The climate in the country is temperate continental, with Mediterranean influence in the southern parts. The Black Sea influences the climate in the eastern part of the country. There are about 2,000 sunny hours from May to October.