
Timeless Charms of Bulgaria

Guaranteed Departures 2018

**April 6-13, May 9-16, May 29-June 5, June 10-17, June 22-29,
July 11-18, August 2-9, August 24-30, September 7-14, October 1-8**

April 6 tour includes Orthodox Easter in Bulgaria; May 29 tour includes Rose Festival in Bulgaria and precedes our Albania Tours; June 22 tour follows our Balkans tour, September 7 tour precedes our Albania tours; October 1 tour follows Albania, Balkans Explorer & Comprehensive tours

Nestling at the heart of Central Europe and occupying the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula, Bulgaria is a land of unspoiled natural beauty, where time has been known to stand still.

Experience Bulgarian traditions and culture in scenic countryside; visit the unique painted monasteries with amazing frescoes; observe folk traditions; enjoy the exquisite taste of the region's cuisine and its' fine wines.



Rila Monastery Mural

Highlights of the Tour

cultural and historic monuments
museums & art galleries
Bulgarian icon-painting heritage
colorful traditional clothing
the unique painted monasteries and wooden churches of Bucovina
Medieval Transylvania
the natural beauty of the mountains

UNESCO List of World Heritage Sites included on our tour:

Boyana Church
Rila Monastery
Kazanluk Tomb
Ivanovo Rock Churches

Detailed Itinerary

Day 1 Arrival in Sofia. Transfer to the hotel, 10 km – 30 min.

Day 2 Sofia (B, D)

You will be picked up at the hotel at 9 am and drive to St. Nedelya Square where we start our 2.5 hour walking city tour. The tour includes the 4th century St. George Rotunda-- a fine monument of Roman architecture, the St. Sophia early Christian basilica, 6th century, which gave the city its name, and the Alexander Nevsky Memorial Cathedral with its golden domes, impressive interior, exquisite murals, icons and colorful mosaics.

We also visit the Spanish-Moresque style synagogue and Jewish Museum, as well as the memorial commemorating the "Saving of the Bulgarian Jews." The synagogue, the church Sveta Nedelya, and the only surviving active mosque in town - are all facing each other.

The afternoon tour starts with a visit to the 13th century Boyana Church, included in the **UNESCO** List of World Heritage Sites.

Afterwards, a visit to the National History Museum, which houses an excellent collection of Bulgarian artifacts. This is followed by a tour of Mountain Vitosha. We'll drive up the mountain to the Golden Bridges and enjoy the beauty of the Stone River – a ribbon of huge boulders running down the mountain side that was once the moraine of an ancient glacier.

This evening, pick up from the hotel at 7 pm for dinner at a local restaurant.

Day 3 Rila Monastery-Rozhen Monastery-Melnick (B,L) **April 8 is Orthodox Easter**

Drive 2 hrs to the 10th century colorfully-painted Rila Monastery, also in the **UNESCO** List of World Heritage Sites. We shall also see the 14th century Hreljo Tower, the five-domed Birth of the Blessed Virgin Church (the original monastery kitchens from the 19th century are closed for restoration). The monastery houses a rich museum collection of valuable old manuscripts and documents, charters and icons, an ethnographic exhibition of fabrics, jewelry, carpets and wrought iron objects, and a library containing more than 16,000 books. Four to five monks still live here.

During Orthodox Easter, we will attend the service at Rila Monastery and observe the local people dressed in their finest.

Drive to 12-13th century Rozhen Monastery (1.5 hrs), with its Blessed Virgin Church, decorated with over 150 biblical scenes. We have lunch at a local restaurant on the way.

Afterwards, we drive about 30 minutes to the charming museum town of Melnik, surrounded by strangely-shaped sandstone rocks.

We visit the Manolev's wine-cellar, dug into sandstone rocks on top of a hill above town. We will walk thru the cellar and sit outside for a fine view! For those that wish, several types of wines can be tasted and bought (pay direct, approx. 26 euro).

Day 4 Bansko-Plodiv (B, L)

Morning visit to Kordopulova House, a local historical museum and some time to walk about town. The Kordopulova House was built in 1758 and it is named after the wine merchant Manolis Kordopulov to whom it once belonged. The curious fact about the house is that it is supposed to be the biggest residential building on the Balkan Peninsula from the Revival Period. The pearl of the house is the reception room, having twenty-four windows with Venetian stained glass facing the four directions of the world. What can also be seen is fine wood carvings and drawn ornaments on cupboards and ceilings. Another notable part of the Kordopulova House is the enormous wine cellar, equipped with special canals and ventilation. At present, the house is a museum that is open daily from 8:00 am - 8:00 pm.

Drive to the museum town of Bansko (1.5 hrs) to experience Bulgarian culture and ancient architecture. We'll stroll the cobblestone streets and visit the Holy Trinity Church built in the 19th century and known for its interior wood carvings and murals painted by local artists. Lunch stop at a traditional family owned restaurant, en-route.

Drive to Plovdiv (2.5 hrs), famous for its Old Town with distinctive revival architecture popular among 18th-19th century merchants. Plovdiv is Bulgaria's second largest city, one of the most colorful towns in Bulgaria and one of the oldest in Europe. No one can tell exactly when the foundation stone was laid here, although it must have been over 5000 years ago. Its' location, astride the Maritsa River and its' six hills, which are prominent features on the Thracian plain, indicates the strategic significance of the city. Here the Hills meet the Valley and the River... and irresistible charm of this city is delightful.

As we approach Plodiv we will view from the road the Bachkovo Monastery, rising amidst the green slopes of the Rhodopes Mountains. We will visit it tomorrow.

We suggest dinner at Hebros, excellent cuisine, service and ambiance; they often have jazz in evenings (pay direct). **Reservations are a must. Tell your guide at least 1 day in advance if you want to go and he will make the reservation for you.**

Day 5 Full day in and around Plodiv. (B, L)

Morning city sightseeing includes the old town, the 2nd century Roman Theater, Ethnographic Museum, The Holy Virgin Church and others. A walk around the Three Hills is like traveling back in time. We will also have an excursion outside the city to the Bachkovo Monastery. Founded in 1083 by Grigorii Bacuriani, a military commander in the Byzantine Empire, it boasts a rich museum collection and a library containing valuable manuscripts in a lovely setting.

Lunch in the garden of a traditional restaurant called Puldih, built from the Roman fortified wall in Old Town (pending availability, as sometimes they are closed for special events). If this restaurant is closed we will go to another very nice traditional restaurant.

This afternoon we will visit workshops of local artisans to learn about Bulgarian crafts, especially pottery. Afterwards, visits to Orthodox churches (the St. Constantine and Helena Church). The rest of the day is independent time to stroll the quaint town.

In the evening, there are often special events at the amphitheatre from late May through September-October. You may elect to attend such an event optionally (extra fee) should there be one during your visit.

Day 6 Koprivshitsa-Valley of Roses (Kazanlak)-Veliko Turnovo (B,L) June 3 is Rose Festival

Depart at 9 am driving north (approx 1.5 hrs) to the village Koprivshitsa, known for its international folklore festival which occurs once every five years, bringing together over 12,000 performers from all over Bulgaria, making it one of the biggest festivals in Europe!

Continue driving 1.5 hours to Kazanlak is the main city of the Rose Valley, recently known as the Valley of the Thracian Kings. The region around Kazanlak is dotted with dozens of Thracian burial mounds. Here, in summer 2004 Prof. Kitov and a team of fellow archaeologists unearthed an ancient gold funeral mask that they say is as important a discovery as the treasures of Agamemnon and Tutankhamen. This extremely precious discovery is displayed in the local museum.

Sightseeing tour in Kazanlak includes: the Tyulbe (small 15th century Islamic mausoleum), Museum of the Rose and the replica of Kazanlak Tomb from the late 4th – early 3rd century B.C. which is on the **UNESCO** World Heritage List of Sites. The funeral objects and frescoes depicting hunting scenes and the funeral suggest that a Thracian king was probably buried here. The frescoes here are the finest masterpieces of Thracian art discovered to date. The original tomb is housed in a special building and not available for tourists' viewing.

During the Rose Festival, we skip the visit to Koprivshitsa as we need to get to Kazanlak in the morning. We will depart at 6:30 am to reach the rose fields for the rose picking ritual at 8:30 am. We drive through the Valley of the Roses, along the Balkan Range to Banya and Kazanlak (approx 1.5 hr). We will participate in rose picking. There will be a folkloric show with music in the rose fields. Young girls dressed in traditional attire decorate each guest with rose garlands that they plaited the previous night so they are very fresh. You can join the "horos" dance. We then go to the main square in Kazanlak where the Rose Queen Parade will start at 12 noon. We have reserved seats and will mix with the local crowd, see the carnival and enjoy the spirit of the festival. We will enjoy a picnic lunch with wine and another folkloric show. **NOTE:** often in June the weather is rainy here- great for the roses, but we pray for sun for you!

Continue on to Etar (30 min) in the town of Gabrovo to visit the Ethnographic Open-air Village Museum. Everything surrounding the visitor brings him or her back to the period of the Bulgarian Revival with numerous workshops where even today the craftsmen work, using the same instruments and techniques as the past. You can talk to the craftsmen, watch them work and can even try to make something yourself.

Drive onward to Veliko Turnovo (50 min), the capital city of the second Bulgarian Kingdom (12-14th c.). Optional-Based on operation/additional cost: Attend evening Sound and Light show, starts after sunset, approx 9:30 pm.

Day 7 Veliko Tarnovo, Tsarevets and Arbanassi.- Sofia (B,L)

Depart at 8:30 am for the tour of Tsarevets, the place of the patriarchal church and Tzar's royal palaces, the hill where Baldwin's Tower still rises. (Bulgarian Tzar Kaloyan defeated the army of the Latin Emperor Baldwin of Flanders, who was taken prisoner and kept in the tower until his death.)

Onward to Arbanassi, a charming medieval village rich with 17th century architecture. It was the summer residence of boyars (nobility) of the medieval capital city of Tarnovo. The 300 years old houses from the period of the Bulgarian Renaissance together with the five magnificent churches dating back to 17th century, decorated with unique paintings and wood carving are of great interest.

Next, we will view Trapezitsa from Tsarevets Hill - where the foundations of 17 medieval churches were discovered and the original Samovodene Market stood. This market has been brought back to life and, as in olden times, skillful craftsmen fashion and sell exquisite objects in the small restored workshops.

Depart at 1:30 pm for the return to Sofia, approx. 4 hour drive including a lunch break.

Day 8 Depart Sofia (B)
Transfer to the airport.

Price: \$1850 per person based on min 4 people, single room \$250
Rose Festival supplement: \$45 includes rose picking, reserved seating for the parade, folklore show.

Includes:

airport transfers (arriving and departing on tour dates)
all transportation during the program: 4-6 people 8 seat Mercedes mini-van; 7-13 in 17-19 seat coach.
escorted throughout the tour: driver-guide for 2-6 people, driver with separate guide 7-13 people
entrance fees
accommodations in 3-4 star hotels (we use 3 star hotels only when that is the best available).

Meals: seven breakfasts, five lunches, two dinners- as indicated in itinerary
bottled water during drives (1 litre bottle per person per day).

Does Not Include: international flight, tips, personal expenses such as drinks, laundry, phone calls, insurance

Hotels As listed or similar: Location of all hotels are within easy walking distance of the city centers.

Sofia: Thracia Premier Hotel Best Western, 4*, central location near cafes and shops, pleasant rooms, excellent services ; one of the best downtown hotels <http://www.thraciahotel.com/>

Melnick: Despot Slav Hotel is a quaint, traditional hotel. The ambiance is warm/ homey.
<http://www.despotslav.com/index.php?l=en>

Plodiv: Renaissance hotel is a superb 19th century traditional located in the Old Town of Plovdiv. <http://renaissance-bg.com/www4/en/>

Veliko Tarnovo: Gurko Hotel is a small, 3-star, in old town, a 5 minute walk to the city center. http://www.hotel-gurko.com/index_en.php