

The monasteries.

The religion has always been a big part of the Bulgarian history and one of the biggest supportive structures of the Bulgarian people. The “church” has not only been the holy and the saint part of the people lives, but it has also been an educational and revolutionary part. All the monasteries in Bulgaria played a role in the fight against the Ottoman occupancy and lots of revolutionists have found their headquarters and bases in them. A lot of artifacts that were included in that fight are still preserved so we can still find them there. With this journey we will give you a piece of this history, experience ... and the most important, we will give you a piece of Bulgaria.

## Day 1

### Sofia

1. Sofia Ethnographic Museum, National Art Gallery and the former royal palace - The museum presents folk costumes, fabrics, ornaments, wood carvings, wrought iron and others. Situated in the former royal palace with the National Art Gallery.
2. **St. Alexander Nevski Cathedral** was built in the period between 1904 and 1912. The decision to start its construction was taken back in 1879. Prince Battenberg targeted paying for its construction with donations from the Bulgarian people. The first stone was laid in 1882 with an exclusive red carpet. According to the old custom in the foundations of the temple was built in a metal box where the names of the members of the government were recorded.  
The main cluster is 45 meters high. The temple occupies an area of 3170 square meters and can accommodate up to 5000 people - as the largest hall in the National Palace of Culture.  
The bell tower in the temple is 50.52 meters high and has 12 bells, cast and brought from Moscow. The largest bell weighs 12 tons and the smallest 10 kg. And the total weight of all bells is 23 tons.  
The temple was declared a cultural monument in 1924 and its crypt exposes the most beautiful Bulgarian icons.



3. **St. Sofia Temple** - a reddish-brown early Christian basilica St. Sofia is one of the symbols of Bulgaria's capital city. It is depicted on the emblem of the city and the XIV century was his godmother. It was built in the late V century during the reign of Byzantine Emperor Justinian. It is considered the oldest Eastern Orthodox church in Sofia, survived through the vicissitudes of history.



4. **Boyana Church** - Boyana Church is the most remarkable monument of Bulgarian mediaeval painting. It is one of the best preserved and most interesting architectural monuments of the epoch of feudalism. The

frescoes in churches are from 1259. The church has a total of over 240 images that reflect the outstanding achievements of the medieval Bulgarian culture.

Boyana Church was added in UNESCO World Heritage List in 1979.



5. **National Museum of History** - National History Museum was established on May 5, 1973 by decree of the Council of Ministers. On March 2, 1984, celebrating the 1300 anniversary of the Bulgarian state, a new exhibition was opened in the former building of the courthouse.

The museum covers the period from pre-historical times to the present day. Ground floor store exhibits artifacts from ancient times to the Middle Ages and includes gold and silver treasures (like Panagyurishte treasure), ceramics and archaeological findings. The first floor is devoted to the ecclesiastical art of the Bulgarian cultural revival in the 19 century and includes national costumes, carpets and typical furnished rooms from that period.

#### **Overnight**

#### Day 2

Departure after breakfast from Sofia to Melnik (174km from Sofia).

1. **Rila Monastery** (111km from Sofia and 118km from Melnik)- founded in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. During its existence the monastery was repeatedly rebuilt, destroyed and reconstructed. Rila monastery acquired its present appearance in the middle of the last century. It is the largest and most respected Bulgarian monastery. It is believed that the founder of the Rila Monastery is the first Bulgarian hermit Ivan Rilski (876 – 946). Born in the

70<sup>th</sup> of the 9<sup>th</sup> century, witnessed the decline of the First Bulgarian Empire under Tsar Peter, he became one of the most significant figures of the Middle Ages who affected the entire Eastern Orthodox world and is revered as a saint under the name of John of Rila. Founded during Byzantine rule it became the monastery monastic brotherhood in support of the Bulgarian national consciousness.



2. **Melnik** - Kordopoulov house was built in 19<sup>th</sup> century by a wealthy merchant. It is one of the most monumental revival houses in the country. The house is located in the town's eastern part and consists of a ground floor that includes a wine cellar a semi-basement and a bay floor intended to be inhabited. The characteristic Melnik wine cellar is dug into the rock to form a tunnel.
3. **Rozen Monastery** - the largest monastery in the Pirin region and one of the few medieval Bulgarian monasteries preserved relatively intact. The monastery was built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is situated about 5 km from Melnik in the lower parts of Pirin. It offers exceptional views to the peaks of Pirin and Belasitsa mountains, and the popular melove Melnik - located around the city pyramidal hills, formed by the erosion of a clay soil. The current monastery building is from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The church is a



remarkable monument of culture. The murals on the oldest inscription are from 1597. The wooden iconostasis, frescoes and stained glass in the eastern part are very interesting. In the monastery building there is an exposition.

4. **Rupite** (about 20km from Melnik) - Rupite, Petrich has long acquired reputation as the place, which is energizing and receives visitors the most popular Bulgarian prophet Vanga Gushterova, called by the people - "Aunt Vanga. In 1992, the prophetess built church St. Petka Bulgarian, immediately became a place of pilgrimage for thousands of people in need. Icons of the iconostasis were painted by renowned artist Prof. Svetlin Roussev but images of the saints are too realistic and not approved by the Holy Synod. However, the ordinary people like them, which brings an endless stream of visitors. Nearby you can see the house of Grandma Vanga. The whole area is cultivated and is a beautiful spot on the right bank of Struma River. Nearby there are hot mineral springs where the water temperature reaches 78 C° where a huge number of people go seeking relief from various diseases.



Overnight in Melnik.

### Day 3

Breakfast. Depart from Melnik to Devin (about 156km), on the way there you will enjoy one of the most spectacular views that Bulgaria offers - the beauty and glory of Rodopi mountains. The region is full of caves, wild

animals, rivers and it's probably the home of the best Bulgarian folkloric songs.

1. The first stop that we strongly recommend is the Yagodina cave (about 20km past Devin). With its 10,500 meters Yagodina Cave is the third in length in Bulgaria and the longest in the Rhodopi Mountains. It was formed during the Proterozoic period and it has three main levels and two intermediate. The third level was turned into a tourist route in 1971-1982, and it is 1100 meters long. Magnificent and beautiful formations can be seen throughout the tourist route - stalactites, stalagmites, stalaktions, sinter lakes, leopard skin, dendrites, draperies and one of the most unique formations - the cave pearls. Total 22 kinds of entities from the world famous 28 kinds. After visiting the cave you can spend some time around it for lunch in one of the restaurants which surround it and enjoy the magnificent picture of the Trigrad gorge and experience the peaceful and relaxing surrounding of the Rodopi mountains.
2. The next stop on the way is another cave the Devil's throat (Dyavolsko garlo), also about 20km away from Devin and about 15km from Yagodina cave). Devil's Throat cave is a precipice which is formed due to landslide. The cave is situated 1.5 kilometers north of Trigrad, Trigrad Gorge in the Rhodopes. The main part is occupied by a large hall, which is the highest underground waterfall on the Balkan Peninsular. The name comes from the cave entrance in the form resembling a devil's head. The length of the cave is 110 meters, width - 40 meters, and reaches a height of 35 meters. After that it's time to go to Devin to finish this day's adventure in the hug of leisure SPA procedures in your hotel combined with some traditional Bulgarian meals and drinks. Overnight.

### Day 4

Breakfast and departure to Plovdiv (about 115 km from Devin). On the way you will pass through Stoykite (30km from Devin) another village which is included in the UNESCO world heritage and you can make a short stop, then you will pass through another big ski resort in Bulgaria – Pamporovo and you will continue your journey. After that you can visit

1. Krastova forest (70 km from Devin town and about 45 km from Stoykite village). The legend says that a long time ago, there was a big monastery that was on top of the hill and a piece of the Cross of Jesus Christ was kept there. Nowadays it is believed that the place brings health and prosperity to all who visit it, because every rock, stone and tree there carry a piece of the holy cross in itself. After leaving the place on your way to Plovdiv you can stop for a quick lunch at the restaurant which is on the cross road for Lucky municipality and try the local barbeque special meals. After your lunch break you continue descending from the mountain to the low Thracian plane.

1. Bachkovo Monastery (about 30km from Krastova forest) is the second largest Bulgarian monastery after Rila Monastery. Located in the valley of Chepelare river (also known by the locals as Chaya), about 10 kilometers south from Asenovgrad. The monastery is surrounded by the mountain hills, which together with its huge size and oldness make it one of the most visited places in Bulgaria. The complex and its surroundings have become a developed tourist destination with many shops, stalls and restaurants. Here you can find literally everything that grows or is produced in the Rhodope Mountains - rare herbs, homemade jams from wild fruits, goat and buffalo yoghurt and cheese, Rhodope`s woolen blankets.

2. The next stop is the impressive Asenova fortress (about 10km from the Bachkovo monastery). The first written evidence of the castle dates back to the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The fortress was conquered by the Crusaders during the Fourth Crusade. It was enlarged and strengthened during the reign of Tsar Ivan Assen II. In the fall of Bulgaria under Ottoman rule the fortress was destroyed.

3. Upon arrival in Plovdiv you will check in the hotel and have dinner in one of the most famous restaurants in Plovdiv, Veselo selo with a very attractive folkloric program and superb traditional dishes. Overnight.

#### Day 5

Breakfast. Trip around Plovdiv.

1. Old part of Plovdiv. The sights of the city of Plovdiv are difficult to rank in importance, architectural or social significance and uniqueness. Among

them, arguably the most visited and photographed place is the Ancient Theater, built in the 2<sup>nd</sup> century during the reign of Emperor Trajan. Plovdiv Amphitheater is remarkable not only in identifying the architectural and historic significance, but it is also part of the cultural life of the city. It hosts a large number of concerts, operas, plays and many festivals throughout the summer months of the year. To facilitate tourists, the time has collected more significant urban landmarks and monuments in the outlines of three hills, old town, where prehistoric settlement first occurred - the ancient Thracian Evmolpia ancestor of today's Plovdiv.

Nebet Tepe fortress was the stronghold, which extends through the ages on the three hills Nebet, Dzhambaz and Taksim, gave the foundations of today's Old Town of Plovdiv. Today Old Plovdiv has preserved up till now not only the Acropolis fortification stones, but also remarkable revival churches and its own unique architecture style of houses – the houses of Plovdiv city. We recommend you to have your lunch in one of the many restaurants in the old part of the city as most of them offer traditional Bulgarian meals and the atmosphere of the restaurants will give you the feeling that you are part of these old times.

After the trip around the town of Plovdiv you have to leave it behind and continue your journey through the Balkan mountains on the way to Troyan (135 km from Plovdiv), but before going into the city, a short stop to enjoy the view of the whole Balkan mountains from Beklemeto which is about 40 km from Troyan is strongly recommended. Then you can head towards Troyan to enjoy another evening with the big variety of drinks and meals that Bulgaria can offer. When you are in Troyan you can try the local hard drink, which is called rakia, which in this particular region is made mostly from plums. Overnight.

#### Day 6

Breakfast. Visit of the Troyan monastery (only 10 km from the town itself). Established at the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century the third largest monastery in Bulgaria, is picturesquely situated on the banks of the Cherni Osam 10 km from Troyan. It was founded around 1600 (Callistratus of Aphidnae abbot). It is a home to one of the holiest icons in the Bulgarian Orthodoxy - The Three Handed Virgin. Afterwards you will have to start your journey back to Sofia, but before that there is one more sight that we recommend you to see, the town of Koprivshtitsa (70 km from Sofia and 90 km from Troyan), the town has played a major role in the Bulgarian history as one of the most important centers of the uprising against the Turkish occupancy. Koprivshtitsa is still singing the songs of the old times. Around its cobblestone streets you can still hear the sound of running horses, the air is soaked with the scent of resin, thyme and wild strawberries, the whisper

of the wind brings the stories of this magic town. Arrival in Sofia. Dinner and overnight. Departure.

**Price with rented car:**

4-star hotels: 550 Euro per person in a group of 2; 470 Euro per person in a group of 4

Single supplement: 160 Euro

3-star hotels: 480 Euro per person in a group of 2; 390 Euro per person in a group of 4

Single supplement: 135 Euro