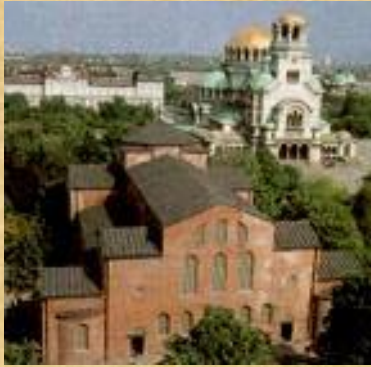


Sofia

Sofia has a history that goes back thousands of years. Through the centuries, many peoples have inhabited it and added to its rich and diverse history. Numerous Neolithic villages have been discovered in the area, while a chalcolithic settlement has been recently discovered in the very center of modern Sofia.



*The St. Sofia Church,
a three-nave basilica
built in the late 5th
century AD*

The Thracian Serdi tribe settled here in the 7th century BC and gave the first recorded name of Sofia -- Serdica. The Byzantines called it Triaditsa and the Slavs - Sredets. The modern city of Sofia was named in the 14th century after the basilica St. Sofia. In Greek, word *safia* means wisdom. In the 3rd century AD, the Romans built strong walls around Serdica an important stopping point on the Roman road to Constantinople.

Today there are many archaeological sites in Sofia, that display the city's diverse history - the castle gates and towers of Serdica, public buildings and streets thousands of years old. A large part of the ancient city of Serdica is underneath important modern buildings.

After the Hun invasion of 441, the town was rebuilt by the Byzantines. The Slavs gave Sredets a key role in the First Bulgarian Empire, and then in 1018 the Byzantines retook Triaditsa. At the end of the 12th century, the Bulgarians returned and Sredets became a major trading center of the Second Bulgarian Empire. The Turks captured Sofia in 1382. The city declined during the feudal unrest of the 19th century, but with the establishment of the Third Bulgarian Empire in 1879, Sofia once again became the capital of Bulgaria.

Rapidly the city's image changed from an Oriental, to a European. Today many streets, buildings, parks, and even whole neighborhoods preserve the architectural style from the turn of the century. Between 1879 and 1939, the population of Sofia grew from 20 000 to 300 000, while today 1 250 000 people live in Sofia. Since ancient times the city was famous for the abundance of cold and thermal mineral water springs in and around it. The water is still available today and is praised for its numerous qualities. Springs may be found in the city center, as well as in the neighbourhoods.

SOFIA - MAIN POINTS OF INTEREST



Alexander Nevski memorial church / Cathedral

Completed in 1912 in honour of the Russian casualties of the 1877-78 War of Liberation from Ottoman Rule. Gold-domed, it is the finest piece of architecture in the Balkans. Craftsmen and artists from 6 countries worked on the five-aisle church in the course of 30 years and created real masterpieces of icons, frescoes, murals and huge chandeliers. The interior decoration, made of Italian marble. Egyptian alabaster, Brazilian onyx, gold, mosaics embodies the spirit of the finest Eastern Orthodox traditions. A superb collection of icons – the best in Bulgaria – can also be seen in the Crypt.

ROTUNDA OF ST. GEORGE



ST. SOFIA CHURCH

The 4th-6th century basilica was built during the reign of Justinian. It has survived intact with 1600- year-old mosaic details and towards the end of the C14 gave the city its name. Beside the wall of the church is the Tomb of the Unknown Soldier. Nearby is the grave of the national poet and writer Ivan Vazov, marked by an engraved boulder.

THE NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE

The biggest Congress Centre in the Balkans. It is located in the centre of the city and faces the Vitosha Mountain.



THE NATIONAL THEATRE



SOFIA UNIVERSITY



The country's most prestigious university.

It was built a decade after Sofia became Bulgaria's capital in 1879 with funds bequeathed by the brothers Evlogi and Christo Georgiev.



DRAGALEVTSI

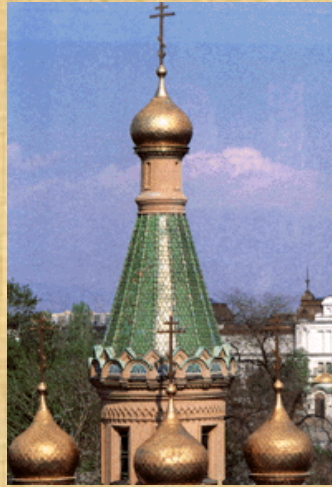
A suburb in the woods at the foot of Mount Vitoshka. About 3 km further on is DRAGALEVTSI MONASTERY, founded during the reign of King Ivan Alexander. Frescoes date back to the C15. The church, which is part of the original monastery, often sheltered the Apostle of Freedom Vassil Levski during the C19.

BOYANA

A suburb at the foot of Mount Vitoshka, notable for the BOYANA CHURCH, built in the C11. Frescoes are claimed to be among the oldest and most interesting examples of East European Medieval art. Like Rila Monastery, the BOYANA CHURCH has been listed by UNESCO as a part of the world's cultural heritage.



THE RUSSIAN CHURCH IN SOFIA



MOUNTAIN VITOSHA



It has become very much a part of Sofia owing to its accessibility by means of the cabin lifts at Knyazhevo and Simeonovo. Cherni Vrah, the highest point, gives wonderful views over the whole region. The winter ski-resort Aleko lies at 1868 m and the ski season lasts from early December until late spring. The beautiful scenery makes the whole area attractive throughout the year.

Going Out

With Bulgarians' innate love of celebrating, entertainment was one of the first sectors to recover from Communist austerity. Bulgarians place a great deal of emphasis on friendships and amusement and city dwellers meet up in cafés, restaurants and bars on most evenings, especially in the summer. Coffee has a special place in the daily lives of Bulgarians and you will find plenty of cafés offering excellent quality espresso in and outdoors.

The cities (Sofia, Plovdiv, Varna) as well as the big resorts on the Black Sea coast boast a long list of discos, hip bars and **nightclubs** with highly competitive prices. In smaller towns, your options will be restricted to **restaurants** but even there you can have plenty of fun. Most traditional restaurants have live folk music and you'll invariably be invited to get up and join in the 'horo' – the national dance.

Throughout the summer there are several **art events** which now have a cult international following, such as the August jazz festival in the mountain town of Bansko.

Shopping

this is your place to spend hours and hours in the numerous fantastic MALLs and stores.

Eating Out

In Bulgaria, you can eat outdoors at least six months of the year – Sofia is chock-a-block with restaurants and a new one opens every month. The higher class ones tend to favour international or Mediterranean cuisines, though most offer some Bulgarian dishes. There are also plenty of hip bistros, and most cafés serve snacks. People tend to eat late and to eat slowly: food is about relaxation and enjoyment. Whatever type of food you prefer, the quality will be high and the price low. You can have an excellent meal for two, with drinks, for GBP 10-15.

Traditional Bulgarian cuisine can be enjoyed at all restaurants in the city.

Cuisine

‘The food was great – fresh, simple and strong ...’

Bulgarian cuisine is one of the tastiest in Europe. Food is still cooked with fresh, naturally grown ingredients. It combines the wonderfully rich Ottoman influence with a peasant cooking style that uses flavor-packed vegetables and herbs. Yum! Start with a salad of fresh tomatoes and home-made sheep’s cheese. Follow up with a slow-baked stew in a clay pot and you’re in heaven. There are plenty of non-meat dishes too.

Bulgaria excels in ‘sirene’ (a white salty cheese) and yoghurt. The yoghurt is so good and so distinctive that it’s exported world wide simply as ‘Bulgarian Yoghurt’. ‘Sirene’ is an ingredient for two unmissable specialities. Try them. Number one is Shopska salad, made with chopped tomatoes, cucumber, peppers and onion. Number two is ‘banitsa’, a savoury flaky pastry that every Bulgarian grabs with a coffee at street stands.

Meat lovers? The main dishes are chicken, pork and lamb-based – typically hearty, simple and tasty. Grilled meats are popular and include ‘kyufteta’ (spicy meat balls), and ‘kebapcheta’ (elongated meat balls). ‘Chushki byurek’ – peppers stuffed with cheese and herbs and fried in breadcrumbs – are a great entrée or a meal in a moment.

Festivals & Religion

Bulgaria preserved its Orthodox Christianity through five centuries of Muslim domination and fifty years of Communist atheism. Nowadays Bulgarians celebrate both Christian celebrations and traditional festivals, many of which have their roots in pagan beliefs. In some regions the predominant religion is Islam and in others the two religions coexist peacefully side-by-side.

The Orthodox churches, with their dark, incense-filled interiors, spectacular icons and heavy wood-and-gold icons engender a sense of mystery and awe. Easter is the largest church celebration in Bulgaria, when a sea of people with swaying candles gather around the churches at midnight to hear mass.

The traditional holidays, rooted deep in folklore, are more prevalent in rural Bulgaria than in the cities and tend to relate to the harvest and health. At the start of Lent, the ‘Koukeri’, men disguised in animal skins and furs, wearing grotesque painted masks, do the rounds of the villages banging loud bells to ward off evil spirits and ensure a good crop; whilst in the south east of Bulgaria ‘Nestinari’ still dance on burning embers to mark the beginning of summer on the feast of Saints Constantine and Elena.

Recommended FD tours from Sofia:

- **Rila Monastery – the biggest Orthodox monastery in the Balkan peninsula**
- **Koprivshtiza, the musem town**

Recommended HD tours

- **The suburbs Simeonovo, Dragalevzi, Boyana**