

ON THE FRONTIER BULGARIA & ITS TREASURES

MONDAY 2 – MONDAY 9 SEPTEMBER 2019 (8 DAYS)

LECTURER: JOHN OSBORNE

£2185

- Fascinating history & culture of a little-known East European country
- Wealth of monuments from Thracian, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman & modern times
- Tour based in three cities: Sofia, Veliko Tarnovo & Plovdiv
- Handsome forested mountain scenery
- Visit led by well-known authority on Bulgaria



Rila Monastery

OVERVIEW

Bulgaria is not well known or much visited – except by those who are looking for an undemanding summer holiday on the Black Sea. Yet there is a great deal of historical and cultural interest here, with monuments and remains from various periods stretching over the last 2,500 years, and some fine landscape.

The earliest inhabitants about whom we know much were the Thracians. Excavations of their royal and aristocratic tombs have revealed a wealth of grave goods crafted in gold and silver for the tribal elites between the sixth and the third centuries BC. The area was incorporated into the Roman Empire and despite the depredations of later invaders there are substantial remains from this period in Plovdiv and Sofia.

Slavs and Bulgars invaded and settled between the fifth and seventh centuries AD. The first Bulgarian kingdom dates from 681 and the Bulgars (or Bulgarians), probably a Turkic people, adopted the Slavic language of the majority of the population that they ruled. In the ninth century, two happenings changed the history of the region for ever: two monks, Cyril and Methodius, devised a script to express Christian texts in the Slavonic language and its successor, the Cyrillic script, spread and established Orthodox Christian culture throughout Eastern Europe; and the pagan rulers of Bulgaria adopted Christianity. Bulgaria was *the* regional power in SE Europe in the thirteenth century and Veliko Tarnovo, which still has impressive remains of its royal citadel, was its capital.

Orthodox Christianity survived the Ottoman conquest in the late fourteenth century and the subsequent 500 years of Ottoman administration, and is evident everywhere in Bulgaria in the monasteries and churches. At the turn of the nineteenth century Bulgaria's 'National Revival', as it is called locally, led to a cultural renaissance, to the rebuilding and redecoration of monasteries, for example, including Rila, and eventually to independence for the church and - with the aid of Russian armies – the establishment of Bulgaria as an independent state. Sofia became the new capital and acquired fine public buildings at the end of the nineteenth century that characterise the centre of the city.

ITINERARY OUTLINE

Day 1: Monday 2 September - We fly from London Heathrow to Sofia, arriving in the early afternoon. Our bus takes us over the **Stara Planina** (the Balkan Range) to the medieval capital of Bulgaria, **Veliko Tarnovo**, where we spend two nights at the **4* Meridian Hotel Bolyarski**, with a fine view over the Yantra River. We have our first group dinner at a local restaurant. Wine, water and coffee are included with all group lunches and dinners.

Day 2: Tuesday 3 September – In the morning of our first full day we walk up to the **Tsarevets**, the royal citadel of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, spectacularly situated with impressive fortifications overlooking the gorge of the River Yantra winding around it, and to the restored patriarchal church at the summit. We then visit the nearby village of **Arbanasi**, where the highlights will be the **Church of the Holy Nativity**, with its complete set of early seventeenth century frescoes, perhaps the finest set in any church in Bulgaria, and the

Constantsaliev House, a ‘museum house’, formerly the home of one of the village’s wealthy merchants. We will enjoy a group lunch in the village, then return to Veliko Tarnovo to visit the restored medieval **Church of St Peter and St Paul**. After we return to the hotel the rest of the afternoon and evening will be free.

Day 3: Wednesday 4 September – We drive south up into the **Balkan Range** to the dramatic summit of the **Shipka Pass**, the site of a crucial battle against the Ottomans in Bulgaria’s war of independence in 1877. At the foot of the mountains we stop to see two Thracian tombs, **Ostrusha** and **Kazanluk**, with their fine Hellenistic paintings, and the **Archaeological Museum**, where some of the spectacular finds from recently excavated Thracian royal tombs nearby are displayed. After a group lunch, we continue to **Plovdiv**, Bulgaria’s second city, where we have two nights at the **4* Hotel Ramada Trimontium** in the pedestrianised city centre. Dinner will be in a local restaurant.

Day 4: Thursday 5 September – We have a leisurely walking tour up through the streets of old **Plovdiv**, passing en route substantial Roman structures - the forum, the stadium and the restored theatre. There are remains of the Byzantine city walls and we pass several well-preserved timber-framed houses dating from the end of the Ottoman period, when Bulgaria enjoyed its ‘National Revival’. We visit the **Church of St Constantine and St Helena** and two of the elegant ‘museum houses’, one of which is now the Ethnographic Museum, with its collection of traditional, local items. Another, the Hindlian House, was the stylish home of an Armenian family. We have lunch at an especially attractive restaurant in the Old Town. The rest of the afternoon will be free, until the early evening when we drive out to a winery in a local village, for a wine tasting and our evening meal.

Day 5: Friday 6 September – In the morning our bus takes us a short distance south into **Rhodope Mountains** to the eleventh century **Bachkovo Monastery**, an attractive ensemble of buildings where the refectory and ossuary will be specially opened for us. After a group lunch locally we drive to **Sofia**, where we spend three nights at the **4* Central Park Hotel**, conveniently situated for exploring the centre of the city. The evening will be free.

Day 6: Saturday 7 September – A whole day’s outing to **Rila**, Bulgaria’s premier monastery, which is beautifully situated in a forested mountain valley south of Sofia. Founded in the tenth century, it has a wonderful arcaded courtyard with fine wooden galleries and balconies around the nineteenth century church. Lunch will be in an attractive restaurant next to the monastery. Our dinner this evening in a restaurant in Sofia will be accompanied by a lively folklore display and traditional music.

Day 7: Sunday 8 September – The centre of **Sofia** has some elegant buildings and is compact enough to be seen mostly on foot. We visit the impressive **Alexander Nevsky Memorial Cathedral**, built to commemorate the Russian troops who died in Bulgaria’s war of independence in 1877/78; the celebration of the Sunday Eucharist is accompanied most movingly by the cathedral choir. We also visit the churches of **St Sophia and St George**, both dating from the early Byzantine period, and we also visit the **Archaeological Museum**. After some free time for lunch, not included, we drive to the **National Historical Museum** on the slopes of Mt Vitoshka to the south of the city. Here are the celebrated Thracian treasures, beautiful gold and silver items from prehistoric Bulgaria. Dinner this evening will be in a local restaurant.

Day 8: Monday 9 September – We leave the hotel and visit the tiny, medieval church at **Boyana** on the southern outskirts of Sofia. It has a remarkable series of frescoes, dating from 1259, one of the finest achievements of Bulgarian painting. After a mid-morning snack we continue to the airport for our flight to London.

PRACTICALITIES

Price £2185 **Without Flights** £2025 **Deposit** £275

Single Supplement £245 (Double/Twin Room for Sole Use)

Hotels 2 nights at the 4* Meridian Hotel Bolyarski, Veliko Tarnovo; 2 nights at the 4* Hotel Ramada Trimontium, Plovdiv; 3 nights at the 4* Central Park Hotel, Sofia

Flights British Airways

Outward: **BA890** Departs London Heathrow (Terminal 5) **0745**, arrive Sofia **1255**

Return: **BA891** Departs Sofia **1345**, arrive London Heathrow (Terminal 5) **1515**

Price includes 5 dinners & 5 lunches with wine, water & coffee, all local transfers, City Tax, entry fees & gratuities, services of John Osborne and our local tour manager

Not included Travel to/from Heathrow, 2 dinners & 1 lunch



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