

EXPLORE!



Bulgaria Winter Surva Festival

BULGARIA - TRIP CODE BUG

BEYOND

Why book this trip?

On this winter festival trip experience ancient customs and creative costumes at the Surva International Festival of Masquerade Games. This is combined with an opportunity to see fading abandoned Soviet monuments and Socialist artwork.

- **Surva Festival** - Attend a celebration of ancient traditions with participants dressed in a wonderfully weird array of elaborate outfits
- **Soviet history** - Discover old Soviet monuments that have been left abandoned, see Socialist art and have dinner in a communist style restaurant
- **Plovdiv** - See the colourful mansion houses in the old town and the Roman amphitheatre in Europe's 2019 Capital of Culture



INCLUDED MEALS
Breakfast: 10
Dinner: 1



TRIP STAFF
Explore Tour
Leader
Driver(s)



TRANSPORT
Bus



ACCOMMODATION
10 nights standard
hotel



TRIP PACE:
Full on



GROUP SIZE:
12 - 18

Itinerary

Itineraries on some departure dates may differ, please select the itinerary that you wish to explore.

DAY 1 - Join trip in Sofia

Join the trip in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, and check-in to our hotel. Sofia has a long history which can be seen by the onion-domed churches, Ottoman mosques, Roman ruins and old Soviet monuments. However, it is largely modern and youthful with a wealth of museums, art galleries, cafes and restaurants.

Depending on your flight times or if you're extending your stay by a night then you may like to visit the Archaeological Museum where there are Thracian, Roman and medieval artefacts on display in a former mosque dating from 1496. Or perhaps the ancient ruins of Serdica, which were discovered during the building of a new metro station and where you can see a partially excavated section of eight streets, an early Christian church and a bathhouse from this old Roman city.

This evening you'll have your first chance to sample Bulgarian cuisine. Food in Bulgaria tends to be made from fresh local produce and dinner usually starts with a salad such as shopska salata consisting of tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers and white cheese. Other specialities include kebabche, small and spicy minced meat rolls, and sarmi, stuffed cabbage or vine leaves. Both red and white wines are popular, as is the local brandy rakia and the aniseed spirit mastika.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Budapest (or similar)



Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: NONE

DAY 2 - Discover medieval Veliko Tarnovo and the Tsarevets Fortress

This morning we will drive around three hours to one of Bulgaria's oldest towns, Veliko Tarnovo. Not regularly frequented by tourists this sleepy mountain town is a hidden treasure, which exudes medieval history with its fortified walls, cobbled ramshackle lanes and the mighty Tsarevets Fortress, which was formerly the city citadel. We will walk up to this fort, which was once home to the tsars, to some of the ruins of over 400 houses, more than a dozen churches and the Royal Palace. We will also visit the Asen Dynasty Monument and the handicraft market, Samovodska Charshiya, which has changed little over the past two centuries. This street is lined with small antique shops displaying communist relics and craft shops where local artisans hammer jewellery and paint religious icons.



ACCOMMODATION:

Hotel Bolyarski (or similar)



Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 3 - See crumbling Communist monuments and the Black Sea coast

We drive towards the Black Sea coast, but stop along the way at the Monument to 1,300 Years of Bulgaria in Shumen. Built in 1981 this massive concrete structure sits on a hilltop and is visible from around 30 kilometres away. The Cubist style figures show kings and heroes from Bulgaria's past in such a way that won't seem out of place in 'Lord of the Rings' novel.

We arrive in Varna and visit the Park-Monument Dedicated to the Bulgarian-Soviet Friendship. Built once again on a hilltop this large v-wing shaped concrete statue is an imposing sight. To reach the statue we need to climb the 300 plus steps of the Staircase of Victory and from the top the Brutalist style giant soldiers loom over us menacingly.

The rest of the afternoon is free to explore more of Varna. The town sits on the Black Sea coast and it's not uncommon at this time of year for the waves to freeze along the seafront in spectacular icicle displays. You might like to take a stroll through the largest landscaped park in the Balkans, the Sea Garden, where there are a variety of sculptures. If the weather is too cold to be outside for long then there's the opportunity to visit the Retro Car Museum which is dedicated to the Socialist period from

1945-1989 where you can see everyday items, vintage cars and wax-works of famous personalities from the time. There's also the chance to have a wine tasting of five locally produced wines accompanied with some snacks.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Divesta (or similar)



Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 4 - Visit to UNESCO-Listed coastal Nessebar en route to the Rose Valley

This morning we drive further along the coast to the UNESCO-Listed ancient city of Nessebar. Situated on a rocky peninsula it was originally a Thracian settlement before becoming a Greek colony. Most of the remains are from the Hellenistic period including the Temple of Apollo, acropolis and section of the old city walls. There are also the ruins of a Byzantine fortress and colourful 19th century wooden houses. Whilst here we'll visit the town's most impressive church - Saint Stephen, which has been expanded over the years since the 11th century and contains an array of different elements from various time periods including over 250 colourful murals depicting Biblical scenes. We will also visit the Archaeological Museum, which explains more about the town's long history.

Following our visit we drive on to Kazanlak in the heart of the Rose Valley and our Explore Leader will take us a brief introduction walk of the town. The Rose Valley sits between the Middle Forest Mountain and the Balkan Mountains, and the rosa damascene variety of flower has been cultivated here for centuries to produce rose oil.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Palas (or similar)



Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE





MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 5 - Go to Shipka Memorial Church and see abandoned Soviet monuments

Our first stop today is deep in the mountains at the monument at the peak of the Shipka Pass where we'll learn about the battle that took place here. Also later today we will visit the Shipka Memorial Church. Its tall bell tower, golden domes and intricately decorated red and white exterior stand out somewhat from the remote surrounding tree covered hills. The church is dedicated to the Russian soldiers who gave their lives in the Battles of Shipka Pass. The names of the fallen soldiers are inscribed on walls of the church's crypt and its bells are cast from battlefield cartridges and are extremely heavy, weighing up to 12 tons.

At Buzludzha peak we'll stop by at an abandoned Soviet monument, which resembles a large concrete UFO, which has now been strewn with graffiti, and is parked next to a tall pillar with a red star window at the top.

Our last stop today is at the Monument to the Defenders of Stara Zagora. This large stone and steel Brutalist memorial statue is to remember the 14,000 soldiers that lost their lives in the defence of the city back in the 1800s. It depicts a Russian officer commanding a force of Bulgarian volunteer soldiers.

Late this afternoon we drive to Plovdiv where we spend the next two nights.

Please note that if road conditions are poor due to ice or snow then we might be unable to drive over the Shipka Pass and we'll need to take an alternative route.



ACCOMMODATION:

Park Hotel Plovdiv (or similar)



Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 6 - Explore Plovdiv on foot including the Roman Theatre

Plovdiv is an ancient city built on seven hills, and it is in fact Europe's oldest continuously inhabited city. Its old town's winding cobbled lanes are crammed with colourful mansion houses that have been turned into museums, galleries, shops and restaurants. It will be Europe's Capital of Culture in 2019.

Our Explore Leader will take us on a tour of the highlights of Plovdiv this morning. The most famous of which is probably the well preserved Roman Theatre of Philipopol, which is still used for concerts and theatrical performances. The rows of marble seats are set on a hillside with views over the city sprawling below it.

This afternoon is free for you to discover more of the old town and perhaps to visit the Ethnographic Museum, which is housed in an 1847 merchant's house. You could stroll among the National Revival era colourful houses, as well as going into the Church of Saint Constantine and Helena.



ACCOMMODATION:
Park Hotel Plovdiv (or similar)

Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 7 - Explore Sofia, see Socialist art and have a Communist style dinner

We drive back to Sofia this morning and on arrival our Explore Leader will take us on walking tour where we will go into the Neo-Byzantine Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, which was built to commemorate the 200,000 Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgaria's independence. We'll also see remnants from the city's Soviet era when we visit the huge Palace of Culture exhibition centre and Independence Square or the Largo, as it's also known, which is regarded as being one of the best displays of Socialist Classicism architecture that remains in Eastern Europe.

We'll then take the metro to visit the Monument to the Soviet Army, which is a tribute to the Russian soldiers who died supporting Bulgarian efforts during World War II and is surrounded by a large park. In recent years its sculpted bronze statues have frequently been vandalised with them being painted in a pop art style. The paint keeps being removed by the authorities and then a new design will appear a short time later. The statues have been bright pink, painted in the style of comic book heroes and villains, in the colours of the Bulgarian flag, and more, so who knows what the statues will look like when we visit them.

Next we'll visit the Museum of Socialist Art where we'll find many of the items removed from around the country when Soviet times came to an end such as unwanted statues of Lenin, the red star from Sofia's Party House and footage from old propaganda films.

This evening we'll have a 3-course dinner in the unusual Raketa Rakia Bar, which is designed to transport us back to the times of the communist regime. They serve traditional dishes and a wide selection of rakia.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Budapest (or similar)

Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST & DINNER

DAY 8 - Visit the Rila Monastery and attend the colourful Surva Festival

This morning we drive to the UNESCO World Heritage Site of Rila Monastery, set in a strikingly beautiful mountain valley; it is a hugely important religious and cultural centre for the Bulgarian people. Remaining in wonderful condition it has the most stunning brightly coloured frescoes and distinctive striped brickwork. Originally founded in the 10th century the monastery served to preserve Bulgarian culture during the 400 years of Ottoman rule and was a hiding place for the Bulgarian revolutionaries. Today the magnificent church and its museum house a priceless collection of frescoes, gilded iconostasis and religious art and artefacts.

Later this afternoon we drive to Pernik to attend the opening day of the Surva International Festival of Masquerade Games, which is the oldest festival of its kind in Bulgaria. This small industrial town annually during this one weekend in January becomes awash with colour and has done since the festival's inauguration in 1966. In 2015 UNESCO designated the festival as being a site of intangible cultural heritage, as it is a unique event that is unlike anything else held worldwide and displays traditions that were almost entirely lost during Bulgaria's years of communist rule. It is a celebration of ancient folklore and pagan traditions, which is little known by Western tourists. Participants dress in a wonderfully weird array of elaborate costumes and masks including fluffy outfits that resemble large mythical beasts that are designed to ward off evil spirits and bring good luck for the upcoming spring harvest. Outfits are typically made from sheep skin and wool and decorated with colourful beads, ribbons, wood, fabrics, paper mache and animal horns, and are accessorised with floral headdresses and bell-laden belts. About 100 groups from every folklore region of Bulgaria attend, as well as a few international participants, and usually there are about 6,000 visitors at the event. The masks vary depending on the region the participants are from and those taking part in the festivities are known as Kukeri. Originally all the Kukeri would have been single men trying to attract a wife, but nowadays more women and children are also becoming involved. During the parades we'll get to experience a variety of colourful customs, folk songs and dances, as well as seeing a number of outdoor exhibitions around the town.

Late this evening we drive about 35 minutes back to Sofia.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Budapest (or similar)

Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE





MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 9 - Watch the parades at the Surva Festival

Today we'll return to Pernik to spend the whole day enjoying the sights and sounds of the celebrations. As well as watching the parades there'll be the chance to see culinary demonstrations and of course to try the hearty warming winter food that is on offer, such as spit roast pork, kavarma stew made with pork or chicken and vegetables in a clay pot or banitsa, a salty pastry made with plenty of eggs and cheese. There will of course be plenty of Bulgarian wine, beer and rakia to try too.

The teams at the parade are all competing against one another within different categories that include children and youth groups. So young and old alike come to take part and watch the festivities. Participants will do the kuker dance, which is an ancient ritual where their masks and bells are their weapons against evil spirits that lurk in the basements and attics of the towns houses. The performers will therefore go from house to house to scare these spirits away and bring good luck, health and happiness to the residents living there. There will be a bazaar at the festival where you can buy a range of handmade souvenirs and also a bell and a mask and should you choose to join in with the dancing through the streets. The masks usually include the colour red to symbolise fertility and the sun, black to represent Mother Earth and white to signify light and water - all the things you need for a successful spring harvest.

We drive back to Sofia this evening.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Budapest (or similar)



Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 10 - Closing day of the Surva Festival

We'll drive back to Pernik this morning to attend the final day of the festival where we'll see more performances and demonstrations. Participants will be judged on the authenticity and creativity of their costumes and also from a series of folk dancing and singing performances held on the streets and an outdoor stage. We'll also then get to see the closing ceremony and concert.

We return to Sofia this evening.



ACCOMMODATION:
Hotel Budapest (or similar)

Grade: Standard Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

DAY 11 - Trip ends in Sofia

Our trip ends after breakfast at our hotel in Sofia.



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

Trip information

Country information

Bulgaria

Climate

Bulgaria has a somewhat temperate climate, influence by the combination of Mediterranean and Eastern European weather systems. The winters are mild and the summers warm and fresh. The alpine regions can be cooler, but Ezerovo is one of the sunniest areas in this part of Europe, with some 280 days of sunshine a year.

Time difference to GMT

+2

Plugs

2 Pin Round

Religion

Bulgarian Orthodox, Islam

Language

Bulgarian, Russian and English.

Budgeting and packing

Optional activities

The following excursions and/or activities are usually available and may be arranged locally. Estimated costs are provided below for guidance only, are on a per person basis unless shown otherwise, and may depend on the number of participants. Prices quoted are correct as of the date these tour notes were originally issued but may change at any time due to currency fluctuations. Please note: These activities are booked and paid for direct with the supplier and do not form part of your Explore holiday contract.

A selection of optional activities are listed below to help you budget for your holiday. Whilst the trip price you pay before you travel includes a great selection of highlights, we have also built in free time to allow you the flexibility to choose from a carefully selected range of additional excursions and activities or take time to relax, the choice is yours. At certain destinations along the way there may be several options to choose from and it may not be possible to fit all the activities in; your Explore Leader will be able to give advice on which are the most suitable for you.

Varna:

Visit to the Retro Car Museum on day 3, entrance fee €6.00 per person.

Wine tasting €16.00 per person.

Please note that all optional excursions listed above are subject to change and availability and they may not all be possible to offer on every departure date.

Clothing

We recommend packing warm layers of breathable fabrics including a fleece/jumper and taking a winter hat that covers your ears, waterproof gloves (and glove liners for when you're taking photos), a scarf, thick hiking socks and sufficient waterproofs including a windproof jacket and trousers. You may also find thermal underwear, ski trousers or salopettes, a ski jacket and a ski face/neck mask useful. Ladies should take a headscarf to cover their head when entering religious sites.

Footwear

We recommend taking warm comfortable waterproof walking boots that have sufficient grip for icy conditions and are suitable for walking in snow. You may find taking some over-shoe ice grips to be of use. These can be purchased online and from most outdoor stores.

Luggage

20kg

Luggage: On tour

One main piece of baggage and a day pack. Remember you are expected to carry your own luggage so don't overload yourself.

Equipment

We advise taking a water bottle for our included walks as well as sun glasses, lip balm and sunscreen. You

may find that walking poles are useful, as are gaiters for walking in the snow if you do not have waterproof trousers. In case of emergency we also recommend that you carry a torch and a first aid kit.

Tipping

Explore leader

At your discretion you might also consider tipping your Explore Leader in appreciation of the efficiency and service you receive.

Local crew

Although entirely voluntary, tipping is a recognised part of life in this region of the world. Some local staff will look to members of the group for personal recognition of particular services provided. Accordingly please allow £25.00 for tipping.

In order to make things easier for you, the Explore Leaders may organise a group's tips kitty and if this is the case, they will account for it throughout the trip.

Bulgaria

Food and drink

The costs for meals may vary depending upon location, type of restaurant and number of courses eaten and so the prices given are an average guide. Local restaurants located off the beaten track may be less expensive, whereas an upmarket restaurant located in the centre of a major city may charge more.

Lunch price	Dinner price	Beer price	Water price
£9	£15	£2.3	£1.8

Foreign Exchange

Local currency

Bulgarian Leva.

Recommended Currency For Exchange

All major currencies may be exchanged, but Euros are easiest to exchange. We suggest you travel with Euros cash.

Where To Exchange

Banks or 'Forex' offices in main towns/cities.

ATM Availability

Major towns.

Credit Card Acceptance

Larger hotels and restaurants - of very limited use on this trip.

Travellers Cheques

We do not recommend Travellers cheques. Places to exchange Travellers cheques are very limited.

Transport Information

Bus

Essential Information

FCO Advice

We strongly recommend that you check your government's travel advisory for up-to-date information and advice about your destination: safety and security, entry requirements, health, local laws and customs. For UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office advice [click here](#).

For more information from Explore about travel advice, [click here](#)

Under 18 immigration guidance

Please note that some countries require proof of parental consent when travelling overseas with under 18s. Please check requirements with the relevant embassy or consular office well in advance of travel if this applies to your party.

Price Guarantee

Once your booking has been confirmed we guarantee the price will not increase, whatever the circumstances. Before booking please ensure you have read our important tour pricing information. [Booking Conditions](#)

Visa and Passport Information

Bulgaria: Visas are not required by UK, Australian, New Zealand, US or Canadian citizens. Other nationalities should consult their local embassy or consular office.

All visa information is subject to change. You should confirm all visa related questions with the relevant embassy prior to departure.

If you do require assistance in obtaining a visa then you may consider applying through Explore's recommended visa service in the UK, Travcour. See www.travcour.com to download the relevant visa application for your trip, if applicable (UK citizens only), along with details of how to apply for your visa through Travcour. The Team at Travcour will be happy to answer specific questions relating to visa applications, please call them directly on 0208 5431846.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you are in possession of a full passport, with the correct validity for your chosen destination.

Booking conditions

Before booking your Explore trip, please ensure that you read both our Essential Information and [Booking Conditions](#).

Transfers

Find out more about [Trip Transfer Terms and Conditions](#) before you book.

Booking a land only package with Explore

Customers who have chosen to book on the 'Land Only' arrangements of our tour, please ensure that you have checked your tour specific 'Joining Instructions' prior to booking your own travel arrangements. Your joining instructions can be found below in the dates and prices information.

You may also be eligible for the Free Explore Transfer.

Joining Tour Abroad

Customers booked on the 'Land Only' arrangements will now receive a Free Transfer, provided you arrive and depart on the tour only itinerary start and end dates. The complimentary transfers will be arranged from the Explore designated airport or train station to your trips joining point, and then back from the ending point to the designated airport or train station. Generally the airport or station that Explore have selected will be the one that is closest to the town or city where the trip starts, or the one nearest to the joining point. It will be either an airport or train station but not both.

The exception to this rule is customers who are booked on a tour where the joining and ending point is at the designated airport or train station.

Free transfers are not available for Self-Guided, Polar, Tailormade or Tours for Churches customers.

If you are not eligible for the Free Transfer then you will need to make your own way through to the joining and ending point. On a majority of our tours Explore will be able to provide a private transfer at an additional cost. Please ask for a quote at the time of booking.

For more information regarding the Explore Free Transfer [click here](#)

Insurance

It is a condition of booking with Explore that you have adequate valid travel insurance. It is your responsibility to arrange appropriate travel insurance and ensure you have read and understood the full terms and conditions of your travel insurance policy to ensure that you are covered for all activities you intend to undertake whilst on the tour, including all optional activities. Your Insurance Policy must fully cover you for medical expenses and emergency repatriation to your home country. Please ensure your policy includes medical emergency helicopter evacuation in the event of illness or injury and covers the entire duration of your holiday. If you are trekking at altitude please ensure that there is no upper altitude limit which may limit or exclude cover for your trip. The cost of many of our Polar Voyages will exceed the capped amount covered by standard insurance premiums and you will be required to pay an additional premium to cover the full value of your trip. Please ensure that you are covered for the full amount of your holiday cost, as insufficient cover could invalidate a claim under the policy. Medical and repatriation insurance cover is not mandatory for UK residents who are travelling on trips within the United Kingdom.

Read more information about what travel insurance is required.

Flight information

Explore offers a wide range of flexible flying options to make joining and leaving our trips easy. Read more about them [here](#).

Flight Information

You are able to book this tour on a 'land only' basis or as a 'flight inclusive' package. Your flight inclusive package will be fully protected by the Civil Aviation Authority (CAA) ATOL protection scheme.

Booking a flight inclusive package with Explore

We have a good selection of flights not only from London but from many regional airports around the UK allowing us to compare fares between scheduled carriers as well as low cost and charter airlines. Our dedicated flights team will match the best flight options to your arrival and departure airport. On our website we display a UK flight inclusive package guide price which is generally based on a London departure. To avoid paying supplements or to secure your preferred flight option, we recommend booking as early as possible, especially for peak travel dates.

Included activities

Please note that this departure is travelling in winter and therefore snowy or icy road conditions could mean that itinerary alterations need to be made.




Ability to swim

No.

Bulgaria

Vaccinations

We recommend protection against typhoid, hepatitis A, polio and tetanus. Please check the latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure. The above is not an exhaustive list. Further information regarding vaccinations and travel health advice can be found by following the NHS and NaTHNaC links at Explore Travel Health and from your local healthcare provider. Visa and vaccination requirements are subject to change and should be confirmed by you before travelling.

 <p>AWARD WINNING EXPLORE LEADERS</p>	 <p>PRICE GUARANTEE PROMISE</p>	 <p>AIRPORT TRANSFERS</p>
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