

EXPLORE!

Best of Bulgaria

9 days

Bulgaria - Trip code BOB

Best of Bulgaria

Bulgaria is a mysterious country mostly off the radar of the mass tourism market, yet there is so much to see and do here. It has a long history that is still evident in its towns and cities including communist monuments and ancient Roman amphitheatres, Thracian tombs and medieval fortresses. It also isn't short of natural highlights, with an astonishing seven mountain ranges, wildlife-filled forests and the Black Sea coast. On this trip we aim to give you the perfect introduction to Bulgaria by taking in a mix of all this and more.

Trip highlights

- ★ **Sofia** - Experience Bulgaria's capital city including the historic Alexander Nevsky Cathedral and Saint Nedelya Church
- ★ **Rila Monastery** - Visit this spectacular UNESCO World Heritage Site with its brightly coloured frescoes
- ★ **Rose Valley** - Discover the ancient murals in the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak and learn about Bulgaria's famed rose production
- ★ **Plovdiv** - See the colourful mansion houses in the old town and a Roman amphitheatre in Europe's 2019 Capital of Culture
- ★ **Rhodope Narrow Gauge Railway** - Train journey through the mountains and Chepinska River Gorge to the highest railway station in the Balkans
- ★ **Black Sea** - Explore the UNESCO-Listed ancient city of Nessebar and relax beside the sea in Varna

ACCOMMODATION GRADE:

Standard

Our standard, mid-range accommodation offers a good level of service, often with other amenities such as a restaurant, bar, garden or swimming pool. Generally rooms will be comfortable with en suite facilities.

TRIP PACE:**Full on**

Full on paced trips are for travellers who like their holidays packed with activities and experiences, moving on quickly from place to place with lots of early starts and long, busy days. Some may find them tiring, but others get a buzz from packing their precious holiday-time as chock-a-block full of new experiences as possible!

GROUP SIZE:**12 - 18**

Maximum group size ranges from between 6 to 20 people, depending on the type of trip, the transport and accommodation used and activities included. We rarely have groups that are smaller than five or six people and the average is 12 people plus an Explore leader.

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 Museum of Socialist Art where you'll find many of the items removed from around the country when the Soviet era came to an end such as unwanted statues of Lenin, the red star from Sofia's Party House and footage from old propaganda films. There are also the ancient ruins of Serdica, which were discovered during the building of a new metro station. Now partially excavated are a small 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 kebapche, small and spicy minced meat rolls, and surmi, 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)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: None

DAY 2 - Explore Sophia on foot; visit to Rila Monastery and Museum

Our Explore Leader will take us on walking tour of Sophia this morning 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. Inside Saint Nedelya Church we can view the colourful murals and intricately carved wooden iconostasis, which is the wall separating the nave from the sanctuary of church that's decorated with religious scenes and icons. There's been a church on this spot since medieval times and it's viewed as being the very centre of the city with the ancient crossroads of Serdica sitting beneath it. We then 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.

Following our visit we will drive to Bansko, which sits at 927 metres above sea level in the foothills of the Pirin Mountains. It has a pretty old town centre with winding cobbled streets and stone clad buildings with red terracotta tiled roofs. There are a variety of restaurants, bars and shops here.



Accommodation: Spa Hotel Gardenia (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 3 - Discover mountain villages and take a train journey in the mountains

We start today by driving the short distance to the mountain village of Dobarsko. We'll walk to the UNESCO-Listed Church of Saint Theodore Tyron and Theodore Stratelates to admire the incredible frescoes and icons. In the old churchyard we meet the 'grannies of Dobar' who will show us their traditional customs such as the round dance 'horo' and sing us folk songs. We'll have the chance to taste banitsa cheese pastry as well as homemade cheese.

This afternoon we head back to Bansko to board our train on the Rhodope Narrow Gauge Railway. Our journey takes us through the mountains and the highest valley in the country and the Chepinska River Gorge. After spending a couple of hours on board viewing the striking mountain vistas we'll get off at Avramovo Railway Station, which at 1,267 metres above sea level is the highest in the Balkans. From here we re-board our bus and go to visit Velingrad, the spa capital of Bulgaria. We have time to look around the pretty town with its wide tree lined streets, red-roofed houses, glistening lakes, and Kleptuza, which is the biggest Karst spring in Bulgaria.

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



Accommodation: Hotel Imperial (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 4 - Plovdiv tour including the Roman theatre; see Bachkovo Monastery

Our Explore Leader will take us on a tour of the highlights of Plovdiv. The most famous of which is probably the well preserved Roman Amphitheatre 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. In the old town we'll visit the Ethnographic Museum housed in an 1847 merchant's house and stroll among the National Revival-era colourful houses, as well as going into the Church of Saint Constantine and Helena.

This afternoon we drive out of the city to visit the Bachkovo Monastery, founded in 1083. This large monastic complex is nestled in a remote valley and surrounded by forested mountains. Most of the buildings date from the 17th century and we can view an extensive collection of brightly coloured frescoes and one of the most-cherished icons of the Virgin Mary. After our visit we will return to Plovdiv for a free evening.



Accommodation: Hotel Imperial (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 5 - See Roman mosaics, Neolithic houses and the Shipka Memorial Church

Our first stop today is in Stara Zagora to view a 4th century AD Roman mosaic, which pictures the god Dionysus along with his followers. The mosaic was found during an excavation of the ancient city of Augusta Traiana. Whilst in Stara Zagora we'll also visit the Neolithic Dwellings Museum where on display are the remains of an 8,000 year-old Stone Age house, as well jewellery, household items and tools.

Next we drive deep into the mountains to 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 during the Russo-Turkish War from 1877-78 in a bid to free Bulgaria from the Ottoman Empire. 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.

Following on our visit we drive on to Kazanlak in the heart of the Rose Valley where we spend the next two nights.



Accommodation: Hotel Palace (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 6 - Visit a rose oil distillery, Thracian tomb and Etar Open Air Museum

The flower laden fragrant fields of the Rose Valley sit between the Middle Forest Mountain and the Balkan Mountains, and the rosa damascene variety has been cultivated here for centuries. The rose blossoms are used in the production of rose oil and nearly a ton is made here every year, which is around 70% of the world's overall production. Rose oil is used in many different ways from antiseptics to aphrodisiacs and laxatives to beauty products. We'll visit a rose oil distillery to learn more about this process.

Next we visit the Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak, which was discovered in 1944 and dates back to the Hellenistic period. This ancient burial ground is UNESCO-Listed due to the impressive murals which show images of the ritual funeral feast, traditional dress and fanciful horses. In keeping with Thracian culture the burial site consists of three rooms - the main round burial chamber which would have been the owners final resting place, an antechamber where their chariot, horses and slaves would have been kept for use in the afterlife and a corridor between the two which served as storage for other items needed in the spirit world.

We drive to the northern edge of the Bulgarka Nature Park to visit the Etar Open Air Museum. Here there are around 50 old buildings that showcase Bulgarian customs and craftsmanship, the best known is probably the watermill which dates back to 1780. As well as being historical important, the park is very pretty with lots of running water, cobbled streets and colourful wooden buildings nestled within a leafy valley.

We return to Kazanlak for a free evening.



Accommodation: Hotel Palace (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 7 - Explore the Black Sea coast including UNESCO-Listed Nessebar

This morning we leave the mountains behind and set off for the Black Sea coast. Our first stop is in Burgas where we'll take a short walk along the central street and in the Sea Garden. This area used to be a swamp sandwiched between the seafront and the city, but in 1910 the architect Georgi Duhtev created a landscape garden filled with hundreds of plants from all over the world.

We drive 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. After time exploring the town and in the Archaeological Museum we depart for the seaside resort of Varna. Perhaps this evening you'd like to take a stroll through the largest landscaped park in the Balkans, where there are a variety of sculptures along with an immaculate and wonderfully colourful selection of flowers.



Accommodation: Hotel Divesta (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 8 - Visit ornate church frescoes in Arbanasi and Tsarevets Fortress

We leave the Black Sea behind us early this morning as we depart on what will be our longest travelling day. Our first stop is in Arbanasi Village where we will visit the Nativity Church. In five chambers of this old church there are impressive frescoes dating between 1632 and 1649. There are scenes from both the old and new testaments that show the wheel of life and images of the damned and lost souls in hell being rescued by Jesus.

Next we drive to one of Bulgaria's oldest towns, Veliko Tarnovo. It 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 handicraft market, Samovodska Charshiya, which has changed little over the past two centuries.

This evening we arrive back in Sofia and check-in to our hotel for the final night.



Accommodation: Hotel Budapest (or similar)



Standard Hotel



Single room available



Meals Provided: Breakfast

DAY 9 - Trip ends in Sofia

Our trip ends after breakfast at our hotel in Sofia.



Meals Provided: Breakfast



Why book this trip

On this comprehensive tour of Bulgaria's highlights, in just one week, you can admire century old frescoes, ride on a mountain railway and explore the Black Sea coast. Along the way you'll learn of the regions extensive history from ancient Thracian right up to the rise and fall of communism.

What's included?



Included meals

Breakfast: 8



Transport

Bus
Train



Trip staff

Explore Tour Leader
Driver(s)



Accommodation

8 nights standard hotel

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

Clothing

July and August are the hottest months and lightweight cotton clothing is best. During spring and autumn temperatures can be lower or drop during the evenings and there is also a stronger possibility of rain, although light rainwear may be needed at any time of year. Layered clothing and a warm fleece are recommended for cooler evenings and in the mountains along with a windproof/waterproof jacket. Ladies should take a headscarf to cover their head when entering religious sites.

Footwear

We recommend taking comfortable walking shoes for exploring and trainers or sandals for relaxing.

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, sunscreen and a sun hat. In case of emergency we recommend that you carry a first aid kit and a torch, which you might also find useful for viewing frescoes as churches and tombs can be dimly lit. For the time spent in the countryside you might find mosquito repellent handy. Bring a swimming suit and towel for taking a dip in the Black Sea.

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 £20.00 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.

Country Information

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

£9

Dinner price

£15

Beer price

£2.3

Water price

£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, Accommodation & Meals

Transport Information

Bus, Train

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 transfers will be from the Explore designated airport or train station to the joining point of your tour, and then back from the ending point to the designated airport or train station. 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.

Non refundable permits

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.
