

# EXPLORE!

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## Best of Bulgaria

BULGARIA - TRIP CODE BOB

DISCOVERY

### Why book this trip?

Admire century old church frescoes, ride on a mountain railway and explore the Black Sea coast on this comprehensive Bulgaria highlights tour. Along the way discover the extensive history from ancient Thracian right up to the rise and fall of communism.

- **Rila Monastery** - Explore this spectacular UNESCO World Heritage Site with its brightly coloured frescoes
- **Plovdiv** - In Europe's 2019 Capital of Culture see the colourful mansion houses in the old town and the Roman amphitheatre
- **Rose Valley** - Discover the ancient murals in the Thracian Tomb of Kazanluk and learn about Bulgaria's famed rose production



**INCLUDED MEALS**  
Breakfast: 8



**TRIP STAFF**  
Explore Tour  
Leader  
Driver(s)



**TRANSPORT**  
Bus  
Train



**ACCOMMODATION**  
8 nights  
comfortable 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

Our trip begins in Sofia, Bulgaria's capital. The city 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.

For those arriving on time our Leader plans to meet you in the hotel reception at 6pm for the welcome meeting and for those that wish, there is the chance to go out for dinner. There are no other activities planned today, so you are free to arrive in Sofia at any time. If you would like to receive a complimentary airport transfer today, you'll need to arrive into Sofia Airport (SOF), which is about 30 minutes' drive from the city centre. Should you miss the welcome meeting, your Leader will inform you of any essential information as soon as you catch up.

We have packed in as many highlights of Sofia as we can, but there is very little free time in the city, so if you wish to spend some time discovering more on your own then we would recommend extending your stay for a night or two. Depending on your flight times or if you're extending your stay 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. Alternatively, there is the Museum of Socialist Art where you'll find many of the items removed from around the country when the Soviet era ended, 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 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 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)

Grade: Comfortable Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: NONE

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## DAY 2 - Explore Sofia on foot; visit the Rila Monastery and Museum

This morning we 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 painted in a pop art style. The authorities keep removing the paint 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.

Our Leader will take us on walking tour of Sofia and to visit 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 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 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.

In the early evening, we will arrive in 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:

Hotel Molerite (or similar)

Grade: Comfortable Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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### DAY 3 - Discover Dobarsko mountain village 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, 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 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 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 are now museums, galleries, shops and restaurants. Plovdiv is Europe's Capital of Culture in 2019.



ACCOMMODATION:  
Hotel Dafi (or similar)

Grade: Comfortable Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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### DAY 4 - Plovdiv walking tour; free afternoon in the city

Our 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. 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 is free to explore the city at your own pace.



ACCOMMODATION:  
Hotel Dafi (or similar)



**Grade: Comfortable Hotel**



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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## **DAY 5 - Visit a rose oil distillery and the Thracian Tomb of Kazanluk**

The flower laden fragrant fields (normally in bloom in May) 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.

We visit the Thracian Tomb of Kazanluk, which is a replica of the tomb discovered here in 1944 that 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; an antechamber where their chariot, horses and slaves that were kept for use in the afterlife; and a storage area for other items needed in the spirit world.

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 leave the mountains behind and set off for the Black Sea coast, to Nessebar, where we arrive this evening.



ACCOMMODATION:  
Marieta Palace Hotel (or similar)

Grade: Comfortable Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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### DAY 6 - Free time in UNESCO-Listed Nessebar; arrive in Varna

This morning is free for you to explore the 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. You might like to spend your time exploring the old town, relaxing at the beach or visiting the Archaeological Museum.

This afternoon we depart for the seaside town of Varna. We'll 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.

We arrive at our hotel in Varna in the early evening.



ACCOMMODATION:  
Aqua Hotel Varna Center (or similar)

Grade: Comfortable Hotel



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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### DAY 7 - See Brutalist architecture in Shumen and ornate church frescoes in Arbanasi

We have a little free time before leaving Varna this morning, so perhaps 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.

We leave the Black Sea behind us and stop at the Monument to 1,300 Years of Bulgaria in Shumen. 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 a 'Lord of the Rings' novel.

Next we stop 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.

We arrive in one of Bulgaria's oldest towns, Veliko Tarnovo later this afternoon and check-in to our hotel.



**ACCOMMODATION:**

Hotel Panorama (or similar)



**Grade: Comfortable Hotel**



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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## **DAY 8 - Discover medieval Veliko Tarnovo; arrive back in Sofia**

Veliko Tarnovo 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.

After free time for lunch, we will drive back to Sofia, which takes around four hours. In the early evening, we will arrive and check-in to our hotel for the final night.



**ACCOMMODATION:**

Hotel Budapest (or similar)



**Grade: Comfortable Hotel**



SINGLE ROOM AVAILABLE



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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### **DAY 9 - Trip ends in Sofia**

The trip ends after breakfast at our hotel in Sofia.

There are no activities planned today, so you are free to depart from Sofia at any time.

If your flight is departing later in the day luggage storage facilities are available at our hotel. If you would like to receive a complimentary airport transfer today, you need to depart from Sofia Airport (SOF).



MEALS PROVIDED: BREAKFAST

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## **Trip information**

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### **Climate and 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.

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### **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

Tipping isn't compulsory, and we work hard to ensure that our leaders all receive a fair wage. You may however, want to recognise a leader that has done a great job or really added to your trip by giving them a tip. We're often asked about the recommended amount. It is a tricky one, and down to personal preference, but we would recommend £15 to £20 per person per week as a guideline.

### Local crew

Although 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, you should allow approximately £20 of local currency for tipping.

In order to make things easier for you, the Explore Leader 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.

<b>Lunch price</b>	<b>Dinner price</b>	<b>Beer price</b>	<b>Water price</b>
£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

In larger hotels and restaurants in the main cities. Bulgaria is a cash society so the opportunity to use credit cards on this trip will be limited.

### Travellers Cheques

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

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## Transport, Accommodation & Meals

### Transport Information

Bus, Train

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## Essential Information

### Government Travel Safety 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, Commonwealth & Development 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 be able to apply through Explore's recommended visa service in the UK, Travcour. See [www.travcour.com](http://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 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**

There is no such thing as fast food in Bulgaria with the locals preferring to take their time to savour their meals. We like to use local restaurants and eateries so that you can sample traditional Bulgarian cuisine, but this can be time consuming. If you would rather use your time for lunch to explore more of the towns and cities visited then we would suggest buying supplies from local supermarkets and markets to prepare your own packed lunch. Your trip leader will be happy to point these out to you. In order to limit the amount of plastic used we would recommend bringing your own reusable shopping bag, water bottle and lunch box for this.

## **Ability to swim**

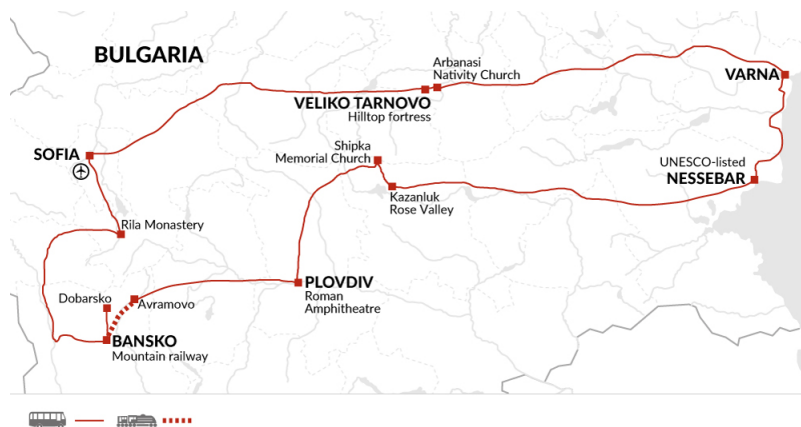
No

## **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.

## Additional Information



## 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.

## Reviews



AWARD WINNING  
EXPLORE LEADERS



PRICE GUARANTEE  
PROMISE



AIRPORT  
TRANSFERS