



ADVENTURES
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BULGARIA'S MOUNTAINS AND MONASTERIES

Trip Summary

HIGHLIGHTS

- Hiking beautiful mountain landscapes with deep gorges, spectacular caves, ancient forests, and flower-filled meadows
- Experiencing the culture and cuisine of a little-known region of Eastern Europe
- Visiting the Bachkovo, Rozhen, and Rila Monasteries
- Observing life in traditional Bulgarian villages and traditional vernacular architecture
- Touring Sofia, Bulgaria's capital city, and Plovdiv, the oldest city in Europe

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TRIP AT A GLANCE

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|-------------|--|
| Location: | Sofia, Bulgaria |
| Activities: | Hiking |
| Arrive: | At our hotel in Sofia at 5:30 p.m. on Day 1 |
| Depart: | At the Sofia airport at 11 a.m. (you can plan to fly out after 1 p.m.) on the last day |

Trip Overview

Lying almost forgotten for years behind the Iron Curtain, Bulgaria remains one of the continent's best kept secrets. Our trip provides the opportunity to discover the amazingly rich cultural and natural heritage of Bulgaria's remote Rhodope, Pirin and Rila Mountains, with opportunity to interact with local people and learn about their way-of-life. In particular our trip offers a unique insight into the local Pomak (Bulgarian Muslim) community as much of our time will be spent staying in and walking amongst traditional Muslim villages. By way of contrast, we will also visit three of Bulgaria's most striking Orthodox Christian monasteries! And the natural history is equally fascinating: during our hikes, there will be excellent opportunities to see a fascinating variety of rare flora and fauna. We know Bulgaria may not be on your bucket list - but it should be!

Bulgaria is a diverse and stunningly beautiful country with charming small villages, colorful history and culture, and delicious fresh food, much of it organically grown. It also a bit of a hidden gem so we won't see many other American tourists and prices are quite low compared to other countries. We will visit longstanding monasteries; hike in the Rila, Pirin, and Rhodope mountains; meet the local residents of traditional Muslim villages; and learn about the transition this country is going through as it emerges from a long period of Soviet domination.

Rating

This trip is for women in good physical condition who enjoy hiking in beautiful countryside and want to learn about the history and culture of Bulgaria. Although for the most part the hiking is moderate, there are occasional steep ascents and descents on rocky paths; the last day in particular is a challenging true mountain hike. The trip is rated 3. Prior to beginning the trip, participants should be engaging in aerobic conditioning, such as walking vigorously up hills, jogging, cross country skiing or stair stepping for 30 - 45 minutes at least 4 times a week.

Rating: 1 2 **[3]** 4 5.

What's Included

- A Bulgarian English-speaking mountain (woman) guide and an AGC guide (provided there are 8 or more registered - if there are fewer than 8 on the trip, there will not be an AGC guide).

- 10 nights lodging in twin/double rooms with private toilet and shower
- 10 breakfasts and 9 lunches and dinners
- All transport within Bulgaria including a private bus with A/C
- Entrance fees to sites that are included in the itinerary
- Tips for the bus driver and restaurant staff

What's not included: Travel to and from Bulgaria, alcoholic beverages, snacks, guide gratuities, and travel insurance

OUR ITINERARY

Below is the itinerary we have planned for the trip. As is true on any adventure travel trip, plans for any specific day may be modified due to weather considerations, unforeseen circumstances, new opportunities, and group interests.

DAY 1

Plan to arrive any time before 3:30 p.m. today. Our hotel, the Crystal Palace, is one of the nicest in Sofia and is located right near the city center, a short walk to the Nevski Cathedral and other historic sites. If you arrive before your room is ready, you can leave your luggage and go out for a walk - despite the different alphabet, Sofia is an easy city to navigate. We'll plan to meet at our hotel at 5:30 p.m. for a welcome and introductions. At 6:30 p.m. we'll meet up with our Bulgarian guide and go out for the first of many delicious dinners together. Overnight Sofia (D)

DAY 2

After breakfast we'll go for a guided tour of Sofia, the capital city. The city is an interesting mix of the old and venerable, and new and tacky. Our tour will include some of the most famous sites, such as the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. After checking out of the hotel and eating a picnic lunch, we set off east, making our way through the Thracian Plain to Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second major city. Plovdiv is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Europe, with a history going back over 8000 years. After dropping off our bags, we'll explore the city on foot. Our guide will show us old Plovdiv with its many churches, museums, old-style houses, and ancient theatre, followed by dinner in the heart of the city. Tonight, we'll stay in a hotel short walk from the old part of town.

Overnight Plovdiv (B, L, D)

DAY 3

Today we leave cities behind and head for the hills! We head south, making our way via the Chepelarska Gorge to the Rodopi Mountains. Our first stop is the Bachkovo Monastery, the second largest in Bulgaria. Founded in 1083, the monastery is known for the unique combination of Byzantine, Caucasian, and Bulgarian culture, united by the common faith. Its most remarkable feature is the frescoes that are seen everywhere. As well as looking around the monastery, we will also walk in the beautiful valley behind it. At the edge of a botanic reserve, there are several interesting chapels tucked away in the forest.

After a picnic lunch we drive on into the heart of the Rodopi Mountains, stopping off at the picturesque village of Shiroka Luka, famous for its traditional architecture. From there we complete our transfer to Yagodina village, a remote mountain town in beautiful surroundings. We will stay in a delightful small family run hotel that offers a warm welcome and wonderful home-cooked food, including some of the best yogurt you will find anywhere.

Hiking: 2 hours, 600-foot elevation gain and loss. Overnight Yagodina (B, L, D)

DAY 4

This is a region of karst limestone and today we'll explore its glories- caves, gorges, and beautiful rock formations. We'll start with an hour's walk right out of our hotel, through the forest and down into Buynovo Gorge and Yagodina Cave. This cave is one of the most spectacular in the country with numerous stalagmites, stalactites, and other unusual cave formations. Part of the cave also contains a fascinating prehistoric dwelling that still preserves a selection of original artefacts. Meeting our bus, we then drive round into the neighboring Trigrad Gorge and our second cave, known as The Devil's Throat. This takes the form of an enormous cavern into which drops a thundering waterfall. It is here that the legendary Thracian musician Orpheus is said to have emerged from the Underworld after a failed attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice. After we emerge from the cave, we'll walk back to Yagodina through the beautiful karst limestone region, famed for its amazingly rich flora that include many endemic species.

Hiking: 3.5 - 4 hours, 635-foot elevation gain, 1,450-foot loss. Overnight Yagodina (B, L, D)

DAY 5

Leaving directly from the hotel, we begin our ascent of Mount Sveti Iliya (4,947 feet), a dramatic limestone peak that rises up directly above the village. Although a steep and stony climb, the effort is worth it, as we are rewarded by panoramic views that not only stretch out over the village itself, but indeed over much of the Western Rodopi Mountains. From the summit, we then make a long zig-zag descent down into the depths of the Buynovsko Gorge, where we will meet up with our bus for a picturesque drive (2 hours 30 minutes) west through the Rodopi Mountains. We spend the night in the tiny village of Leshten, an architectural reserve famed for its vernacular architecture that has only recently been reclaimed. Here we will stay for the next 2 nights in a collection of beautifully restored traditional cottages.

Hiking: 3 - 4 hours, 1,315-foot elevation gain, 1,950-foot loss. Overnight Leshten

DAY 6

A half-hour drive takes us to the village of Skrebatno, from where we set off on a delightful walk. The trail first follows along the crest of the Kanina Gorge, then along the line of an ancient Roman road which drops us down to cross the river, before climbing up to the village of Kovachevitsa. The latter, like Leshten, is an extremely photogenic architectural reserve with some fine examples of typical Rhodope architecture. The picturesque stone cottages and cobbled alleys are a photographer's dream. After free time to explore the village, the bus will then transfer us the short distance back to Leshten.

Hiking: 3 - 4 hours, 885-foot elevation gain, 860-foot loss. Overnight Leshten (B, L, D)

DAY 7

Leaving Leshten on foot, we have a gentle morning walk descending downstream along another wonderful panoramic trail, following the flank of the Kanina valley. Arriving at a small spa resort at the mouth of the gorge, there will be time for a refreshing swim in one of the mineral water pools, before making our way to a nearby Bulgarian Muslim village. Here we will be welcomed by some of the local women and treated to a home-cooked lunch, followed by a chance to learn about their traditional handicrafts, customs, and folk music. Later in the afternoon, we drive across the southern Pirin Mountains via the Popovi Livadi pass to arrive in Melnik, the smallest and perhaps most beautiful town in Bulgaria, stunningly set in an amazing sandstone gorge. It is more reminiscent of Greece than other parts of Bulgaria, not surprising when you realize how close we are to the Greece border here. Here we will be based for the next two nights at Hotel 'Melnik', perfectly located on the flank of the cliffs over-looking the town.

Hiking: 3 hours, 1,165-foot elevation loss. Overnight Melnik, Hotel Melnik (B,L,D)

DAY 8

Here we can visit an interesting church that is connected with the fascinating life history of a famous local prophetess. Continuing our walk, we finally reach the Rozhen Monastery. This is one of the most picturesque and tranquil in Bulgaria and one of the few Bulgarian monasteries from the Middle Ages which has survived relatively intact up to present days. Having looked round the monastery, our bus will take us back to Melnik where the remainder of the afternoon and evening will be left free for you to explore this very interesting town.

Hiking: 3 - 4 hours, 1,525-foot elevation gain, 560-foot loss. Overnight: Melnik, Hotel Melnik (B, L)

DAY 9

We begin the day with an optional early morning hike on the Sveti Nikola elevation above Melnik where there are ruins of several churches and monasteries as well as an old fortress. The hill also offers superb views over the surrounding region. Leaving Melnik we travel north up the Struma Valley, and then cut back east into the heart of the Rila mountains. Here we will visit the Rila Monastery. This is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is beautifully located beneath the Rila Mountains highest peaks. Aside from the sheer beauty of the many icons, Rila's importance stems from its role as a repository of Bulgarian culture during the different periods that Bulgaria has been dominated by other countries.

We'll start with a visit to the hermitage of Saint John of Rila and have the opportunity to purify ourselves as we climb out a tunnel from his cave (this is optional). We will then take a short walk in the surrounding Rila Monastery Nature Park to the monastery itself. We'll take time to look at the many icons and soak up the atmosphere of the monastery itself. Later in the afternoon, we transfer to the other side of the range and our family-run hotel in the village of Govedartsi where we will be based for the next two nights.

Hiking: **Sveti Nikola** - 90 minutes, elevation gain and loss are about 450-feet.

Rila Monastery - 90 minutes, elevation gain about 600-feet, loss is 300-feet. Overnight Govedartsi (B, L, D)

DAY 10

Our final hike in Bulgaria is a rewarding finale, a challenging true mountain hike in stunning alpine terrain. It's a circular hike that starts by ascending the Malyovitsa valley to a mountain hut. Following a short boulder traverse, we climb, first steeply and then steadily, to a beautiful lake called Strashno Ezero, The Terrifying Lake. This lake is so named because of its stunning background of rugged peaks: a perfect place to enjoy our well-earned picnic. From here we have one final short (260-foot), steep and rocky ascent to the highpoint.

Then it's a long steady descent via another glacial lake, Yonchevo Ezero, back to the starting point, with no overly steep, rocky or difficult sections. We won't be in a hurry and we'll have ample time to enjoy a picnic and put our feet in the lake, take pictures, and drink in the view. We return to Govedartsi and tonight we celebrate our trip with a final farewell dinner. If you haven't yet had the opportunity to sample rakia, the Bulgarian answer to ouzo, this is the night!

Hiking: 4.5 - 6 hours, elevation gain and loss are about 2,300-feet. Overnight Govedartsi (B, L, D)

DAY 11

Leaving the Rila Mountains, we head north to Sofia and its airport. We'll have you there by 11 a.m. and you can plan a flight out for any time after 1 p.m.

ADDITIONAL TRIP INFORMATION

Getting There

The arrival and departure airport is Sofia (SOF) and is served by many of the major airlines. Regardless of what day or time you arrive, we will arrange a transfer for you from the airport to the hotel. If you have the time, we recommend arriving a day or two early in Sofia. This will give you enough time to recover from jet lag and unsnarl any travel issues. Sofia is an easy city to navigate and a safe one to walk around.

Getting Home: On the last day of the trip (Day 11), we'll have you back to the Sofia airport (SOF) by 11 a.m. You can plan a flight out for any time after 1 p.m.

If you would like assistance with airfare, we recommend contacting our AirDesk Partner, [Exito Travel](#). Start by submitting this [form](#). Just fill in your dates and destinations, including any additional notes about preferred carriers, class of service, possible stopovers, etc., and an agent will typically respond via email within a few hours. If you prefer to call, the number is 800-655-4053; be sure to tell them you are traveling with Adventures in Good Company.

Please note: Most of the international airlines are in-network for Exito, so they do not charge extra for their services (and often have access to discounted rates). When necessary, processing fees out-of-network carriers are minimal at around \$35-\$50 per ticket.

Accommodations

In Sofia we will be staying at one of the nicest hotels in the city. Other than that we'll stay in comfortable tourist-class hotels, often family-owned, that are classified two to three star by the Bulgarian classification system. These hotels offer twin rooms with private facilities. Where possible, we try to use smaller more atmospheric hotels.

Travel Insurance

We recommend that you purchase a travel protection plan to help protect you and your travel investment against the unexpected. For your convenience, we offer travel protection through Travelex Insurance Services. For more information on the available plans or to enroll, visit www.travelexinsurance.com or call 1-800-228-9792 and reference location number 06-0331.

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