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Some Facts about Bulgaria you Ought to Know



Св. св. Кирил и Методий

Bulgaria carries the heritage of many ancient civilizations - Prehistoric communities, Thrace, ancient Greece, Rome, Byzantium, Bulgaria and the Islam world all left their marks on these lands.

Bulgaria is also the birthplace of groundbreaking discoveries about our civilization and culture and home to religious cults, customs and practices which thrived here thousands of years before the advent of Christianity. The peoples who once inhabited these lands left behind the rich cultural heritage of seven distinct civilizations.

In 865 **Bulgaria** became the first Slavic country to accept Christianity, while later it also became the first Christian country in which the language of liturgy was that of the people – the Old Bulgarian. The Holy Scripture and the books of liturgy were translated into the common tongue as far back as the 9th century and the Old Bulgarian was recognized as an official liturgical language alongside Greek and Latin.

The creation of the Glagolitic (the Old Bulgarian) alphabet in the 9th century by the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius opened up a new cultural epoch in Europe and when the alphabet was officially recognized, the Old Bulgarian became the language of the Church, literature and the people. In the following centuries the influence of the Old Bulgarian culture spread as far as the whole of southwestern Europe and Kievan Rus'.



The Mysteries of Northeastern Bulgaria



The Great Basilica of Pliska (9th century)



The Golden Church in Veliki Preslav



St. Tsar Boris-Mihail of Bulgaria

Pliska, the capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom, lies 400 km northeast of Sofia, near the town of Kaspichan in the District of Shumen. Here in the year 865 the Bulgarian ruler Tsar Boris I (852-889) accepted the Christian faith from Byzantium and recognized Christianity as the official religion.

The remnants of the first large monastery complex in Christian Bulgaria have been discovered at the ancient capital of Pliska. The complex was surrounded on all sides by tall fortified stone walls. The most impressive sight was the monastery church, also known as the Archbishop's (Great) Basilica, whose architecture and massive construction were unrivalled in the entire Balkan lands. Shelter to the first followers of the holy brothers Cyril and Methodius, the monastery became the most important spiritual centre in Bulgaria.

Veliki Preslav became the capital of Bulgaria, as well as the seat of the first Bulgarian literary school, the School of Preslav, in 893. The Bulgarian Golden Age began here in the 9th century, during the reign of Tsar Simeon the Great (893-927). Bulgaria became the centre of the spiritual and cultural life of the entire Slavic world, and the newly constructed monasteries stood at the heart of the Bulgarian literary tradition.

Veliki Preslav is situated in southeastern Bulgaria, near the regional centre of Shumen. Today the ruins of the old Bulgarian capital spread over an area of over three and a half square kilometres. A citadel (the inner town) and an imposing palace complex have been unearthed behind the inner wall. Another discovery was **the Golden (Simeon's) Church**, built at the beginning of the 10th century. It was the main church of a large monastery associated with the work of Bulgarian literary scholars. The Golden Church was entirely built of marble and had a golden dome decorated with mosaics on the inside.

A Trip to the Holy Places of Northern Bulgaria

The Monasteries around Veliko Tarnovo



The Church of St. Demetrius (11th century)



The Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul (13th - 14th century)



The Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration of the Lord



Veliko Tarnovo. When in 1187, Bulgaria was freed from Byzantine rule, Tarnovo became the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1187-1393). The medieval city grew quickly and became one of the strongest Bulgarian fortresses between the 12th and 14th centuries. The city lies in central Bulgaria, on the slopes of the Stara Planina, and strikes its visitors with its unrivalled beauty and magnificent monuments, associated with Bulgarian history. The surviving fortresses and temples testify to the boom of cultural and artistic life during this period. The surviving Christian churches of Veliko Tarnovo are unique examples of Medieval and Renaissance fine art and architecture. Among them is the oldest and most precisely dated medieval church of St. Demetrius of Thessaloniki, whose construction is associated with the proclamation of the Bulgarian Uprising against the Byzantine rule of 1185 led by the boyars Asen and Petar. Another attractive site is the Church of the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul, from the 13th century, which housed all of the Patriarch's library during the Ottoman rule. The last Bulgarian Patriarch, St. Euthymius of Tarnovo (est. 1327-1401/2), also worked here between 1373 and 1393

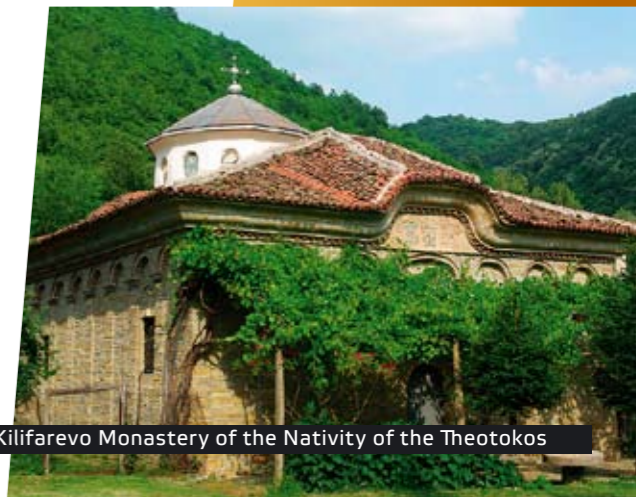
During the time of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1187-1393), monasteries throughout the country, and particularly, those around the capital city of Tarnovo, became active scholarly centres of Medieval Bulgarian literature, art and culture. New religious and philosophical doctrines, which had a huge impact on the cultural development of the Bulgarian nation, developed here.

The Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration of the Lord

7 km from the city of Veliko Tarnovo, in the magnificent gorge of the Yantra river, lies one of the largest and most important landmarks of Bulgarian architecture and construction, the Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration of the Lord. The monastery was founded during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371) and became one of the most significant religious and cultural centres in Bulgaria. The main monastery church, the Church of the Holy Transfiguration, built in 1834, has unique and unrivalled architecture. The murals and icons inside the church are masterworks of the Bulgarian Revival icon painting period.

The Kilifarevo Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos

5 km from the village of Kilifarevo, near Veliko Tarnovo, lies the Kilifarevo Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos. It was built during the reign of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander (1384-1350). Later the monastery became an important literary centre and the birthplace of the renowned Kilifarevo School of Literature. The future Patriarch of the Bulgarian Church, Euthymius (a colossal figure, and spiritual leader of the Bulgarians, and the last Patriarch of the Bulgarian Church during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom) also studied here.



The Kilifarevo Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos



The Church of the Holy Forty Martyrs in Veliko Tarnovo, built by Tsar Ivan Asen II in the 13th century, is the most well-known Medieval Bulgarian monument. The church houses some of the most significant written records of Bulgarian history – the columns of Khan Omurtag and Tsar Asen. The inscription on Asen's Column honours the historic victory of the Bulgarians over the Despot of Epirus Theodore Comnenus in 1230, near Klokochnitsa. This epic battle elevated the Bulgarian Kingdom to power in the Balkan lands.

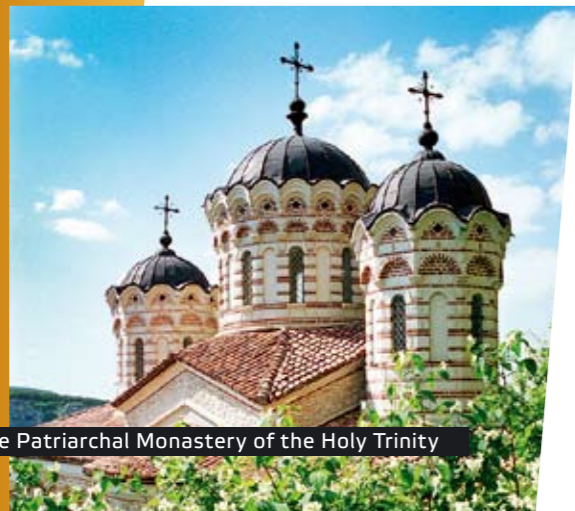


The Plakovo Monastery of St. Elijah the Prophet



The Church of SS Michael and Gabriel the Archangels in the village of Arbanasi

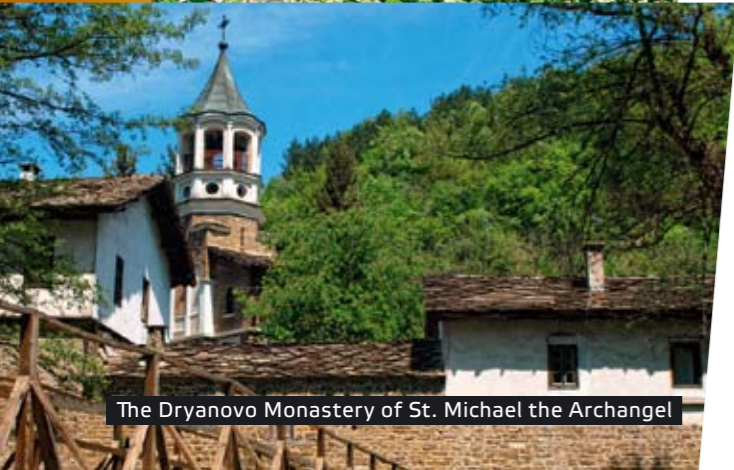
5 km from Veliko Tarnovo lies Arbanasi, one of the most picturesque Bulgarian villages, which has been proclaimed an architectural museum. In addition to typical Revival style buildings, there are a number of imposing churches and monasteries in the village. Among them is the Church of SS Michael and Gabriel the Archangels, the Monastery of St. Nicholas (estimated foundation date around the 12th century), the Arbanasi Monastery of the Holy Theotokos, housing the miraculous icon of the three-handed Theotokos - the Holy Theotokos Troeruchitsa.



The Patriarchal Monastery of the Holy Trinity

The Patriarchal Monastery of the Holy Trinity

The monastery is situated in the gorge of the Yantra river under the western slopes of the Arbanasi Plateau, near the city of Veliko Tarnovo. It is known as one of the oldest monasteries in Bulgaria, founded during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371). In 1376 the Tarnovo Literary School, initiator of the remarkable linguistic reform for the unification of the literary language, was established here.



The Dryanovo Monastery of St. Michael the Archangel

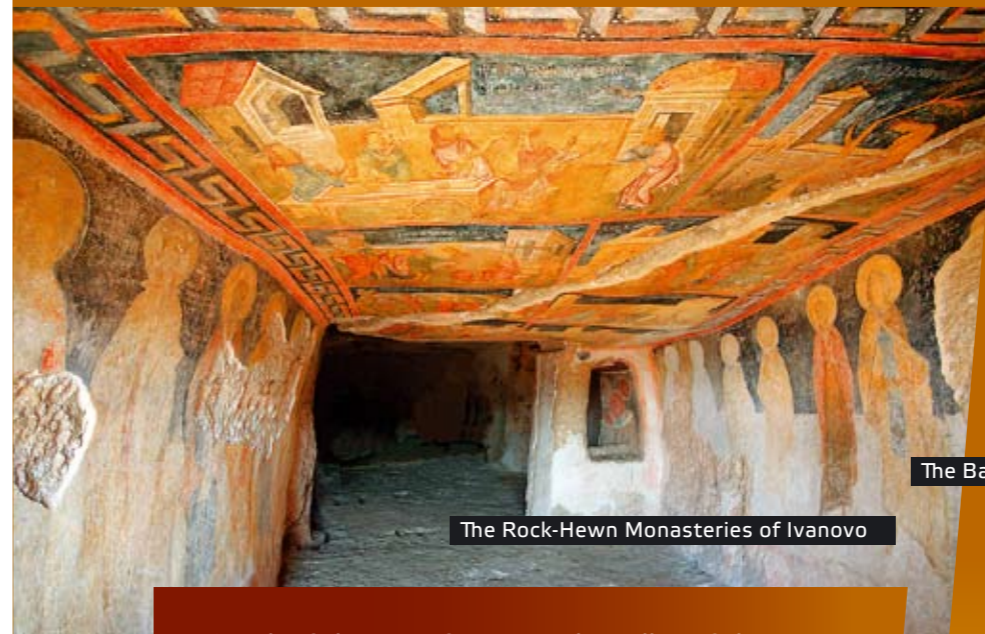
The Dryanovo Monastery of St. Michael the Archangel

Some 30 km south of Veliko Tarnovo, near the town of Dryanovo (District of Gabrovo), lies one of the most visited monasteries in Bulgaria – the Dryanovo Monastery, built during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. Its history is associated with the national liberation battles of the Bulgarians. Inside the walls of the monastery, the Apostle of Freedom, Vasil Levski, prepared the National Uprising in the district of Tarnovo. Also here, after the outbreak of the April Uprising, a band of 200 people witheld the attacks of the large Ottoman army for nine days. The monastery was burned down after the suppression of the revolt. A monument in memory of the sacrifice of the freedom fighters has been built at the site of the revolt. The monastery can provide its visitors with accommodation.



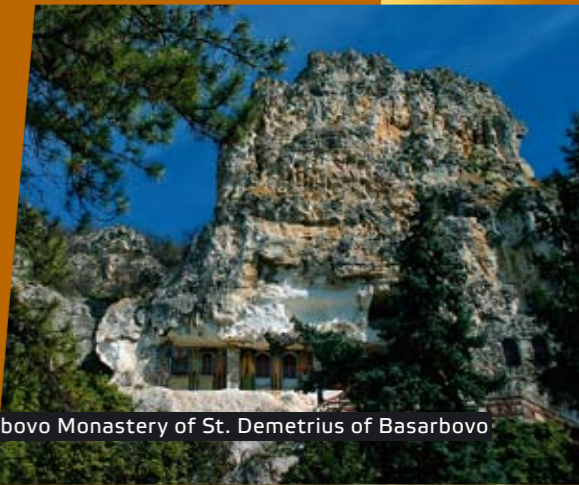
The Sokolski Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos in the village of Etar, Gabrovo

The Rock-Hewn Churches and Monasteries on the Banks of the River Rusenski Lom



The Rock-Hewn Monasteries of Ivanovo

South of the city of Ruse, in the valley of the river Rusenski Lom, near the medieval fortress of Cherven, in northern Bulgaria, are found unique rock-hewn monasteries and churches. The estimated time of their foundation goes back to the first decades of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th century). The clerical activities of the monasteries were under the patronage of the nobles of Tarnovo and the spiritual leaders of the Bulgarian state of this period.



The Basarbovo Monastery of St. Demetrius of Basarbovo



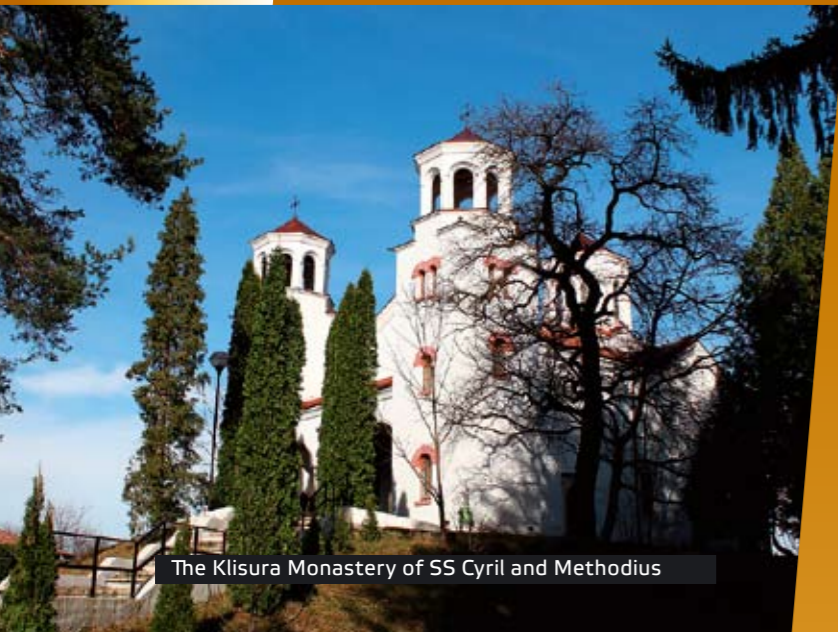
The Rock-Hewn Monasteries of Ivanovo

The Rock-Hewn Monasteries of Ivanovo are situated on the bank of the river Rusenski Lom not far from the village of Ivanovo, south-west of Ruse. The area is commonly known as Pismata. The Church (a hand-hewn cave in a vertical rock 32 m above the ground) is believed to have been painted with donations from the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331-1371). His portrait, as donor of the Church, can still be distinguished today among the surviving murals. The murals of the Church of Ivanovo are considered among the greatest achievements of the Tarnovo Medieval School of Fines Arts of the 14th century, and display some of the most valuable examples of Bulgarian medieval art.

The Basarbovo Monastery of St. Demetrius of Basarbovo

In the picturesque valley of the river Rusenski Lom near the village of Basarbovo and 10 km away from the city of Ruse, one of the most interesting rock-hewn monasteries in Bulgaria, the Rock Monastery of St. Demetrius of Basarbovo is situated. The monastery is estimated to have been founded in the 12th century, however the first written records mentioning the monastery are from the 15th century. Two chambers and a dining cave hall are built at the foot of the rocks. A staircase leads to a rocky platform with a niche, where the rock church itself is located. Another staircase leads to a natural cave, home to the grave of the monk Hrisant who renovated the monastery in 1937.

Christian Monuments in Northwestern Bulgaria



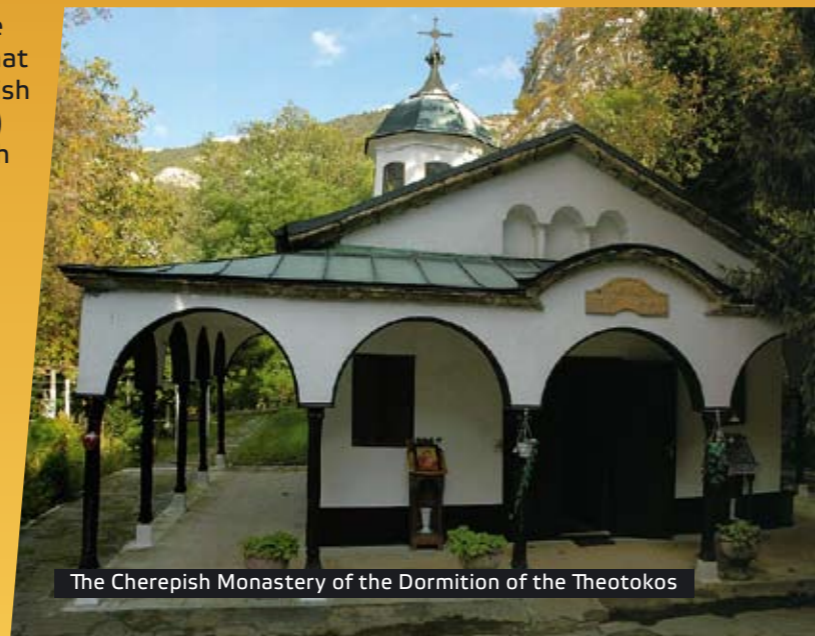
The Klisura Monastery of SS Cyril and Methodius

The Klisura Monastery of SS Cyril and Methodius

At the foothill of the peak of Todorini Kuli, in the western part of Stara Planina, and not far from Vratsa, lies the Klisura Monastery of SS Cyril and Methodius. The monastery is estimated to have been founded in the 13th century. In 1862 it was pillaged and burned down by the Pasha of Berkovitsa, Yusuf Bey, under whose orders 120 pilgrims, including women, elders and children, were killed, while the monks were burned alive. The iconostasis housed in the monastery church is a real artistic apotheosis of the Revival art of the activists of the Samokov and Debar Schools. Visitors to the monastery are offered accommodation, as well as hiking and horse riding activities.

The Cherepish Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos

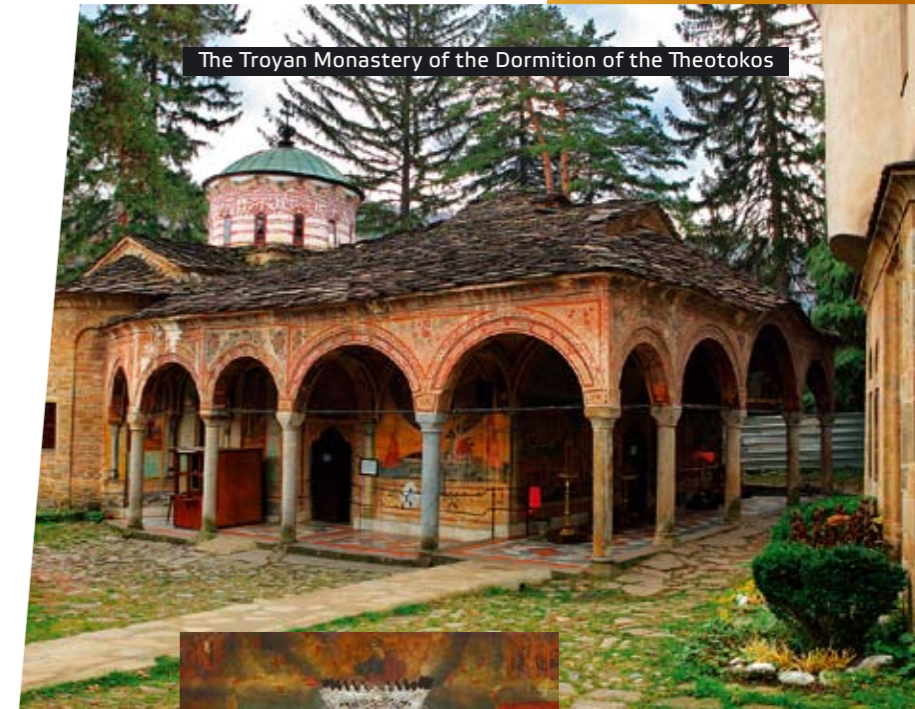
Some 30 km from the town of Vratsa, inside the picturesque gorge of the river Iskar in the Stara Planina, is situated the ancient Cherepish Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos. A medieval legend associates the name of the monastery with the fierce battles of the troops of the last Bulgarian ruler Tsar Ivan Shishman (1371-1393) against the Ottoman invaders. According to the legend, the skulls of the fallen Bulgarian soldiers were so many that the locals started to call the area Cherepish (from the Bulgarian cherep meaning skull) and the nearby monastery – the Cherepish Monastery. In spite of renovations, even today the Cherepish Monastery bears an ancient appearance. The church has preserved its look from before 1612. In addition to its ancient spirit, the monastery is also remarkable for its extraordinary gold iconostasis, sanctuary gates, bishop's throne and silver reliquary. The monastery provides accommodation during the warm season.



The Cherepish Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos

The Troyan Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos

10 km east of the town of Troyan, in a picturesque location on the bank of the river Cherni Osam, lies the Troyan Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos; one of Bulgaria's cultural monuments and the third largest monastery in the country. During the Bulgarian Revival the monastery became a cultural centre and the heart of educational and scholarly activity. A monastery school was established here in the early mid 18th century, in which many famous Bulgarians studied. The murals inside the Church of the Dormition of the Theotokos were painted by the Bulgarian Revival artist and painter Zahari Zograf. He decorated the entire inner section of the church. The monastery has a hotel section and can provide visitors with accommodation.



The Troyan Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos

The Miraculous Icon of the Holy Theotokos Troeruchitsa

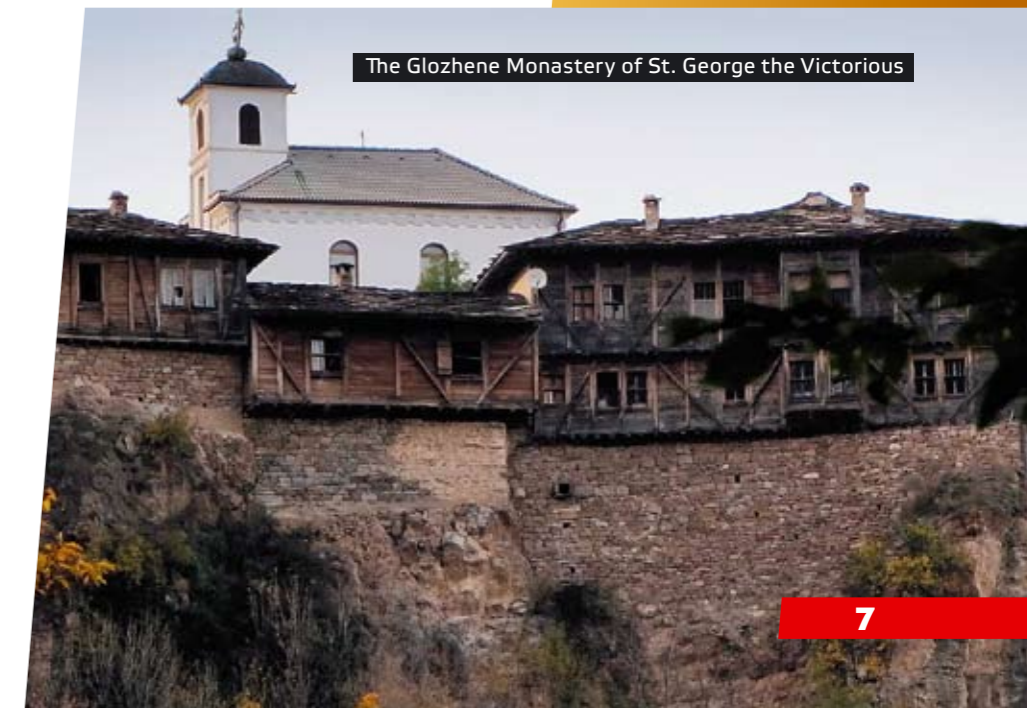
The main monastery church houses the relic of the monastery; the miraculous icon of Troeruchitsa, the three-handed Theotokos, which is a copy of the Troeruchitsa icon of the Hilandar Monastery.



The Icon of the Holy Theotokos Troeruchitsa

The Glozhene Monastery of St. George the Victorious

In the western Balkan, at 870 m above sea level and 15 km from the town of Teteven, on a high rocky terrace separated from the surroundings by vertical cliffs, one of the most fascinating Balkan monasteries is perched; the Glozhene Monastery of St. George the Victorious. According to legend the monastery was founded in the mid 13th century by the Kievan Knyaz Georgi Glozh. The Kievan Pechersk Lavra also brought here its temple icon of St. George the Victorious. Another attraction are the two seals on which the monastery is called a Kievan Monastery.



The Glozhene Monastery of St. George the Victorious

"Serdica is my Rome"

(Constantine the Great)

Sofia is one of the oldest cities in Europe. The capital of Bulgaria, called Serdica by the Thracians, was a favourite place of the Roman Emperor Constantine the Great (306-337). During his reign the city became an Episcopal see, as well as one of the first settlements to officially recognize the Christian faith. In 343-344 the Council of Serdica which was held here solidified the Christian doctrine of the Holy Trinity and the adoption of the Nicene Creed created by the First Ecumenical Council of Nicaea, held in 325.

The Church of the Great Martyr St. George the Victorious

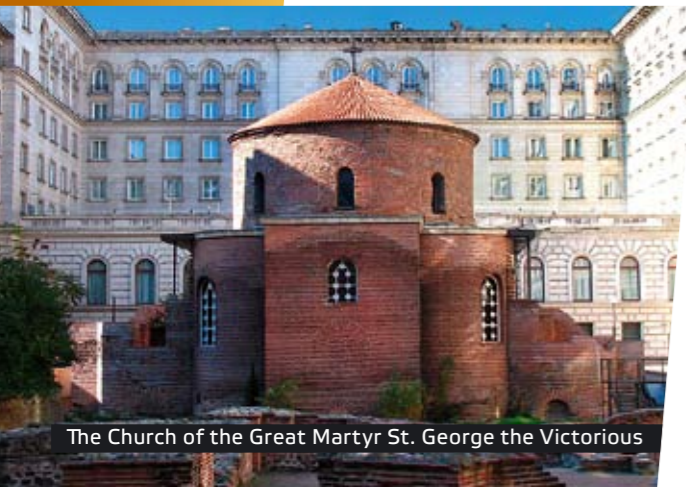
The Church of the Great Martyr St. George the Victorious is the oldest preserved architectural relic in modern Sofia, symbolizing the glory of Ancient Rome. Constantine the Great transformed the building into a Christian church in the 4th century. The church houses the earliest Bulgarian mural painting dating from the 9th century, which has a high artistic value.

The Hagia Sophia Church of Sofia

The Hagia Sophia Church is one of the oldest monumental landmarks of Byzantine art of early Christian times in the Balkans. It was built during the golden age of Byzantine art under the reign of Justinian (527-537), on the remains of earlier Christian churches. The church walls were covered with murals and golden mosaics depicting scenes from the Bible, and the iconostasis stood at the top of 12 gold columns. Today the Hagia Sophia Church is considered one of the greatest architectural monuments of early Christianity.

The Boyana Church

The Boyana Church in the city of Sofia (built in the 11th-12th centuries) is known as one of the most exquisite and best preserved landmarks of south European Medieval art. It owes its worldwide fame to the exquisite murals painted in 1259 by an unknown icon painter of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th-14th centuries). The murals are considered one of the most valuable collections of Medieval fine art preceding the masterpieces of the Italian Renaissance.



The Church of the Great Martyr St. George the Victorious



The Hagia Sophia Church



The Boyana Church

The St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral

The patriarchal cathedral of St. Alexander Nevsky is one of the symbols of the city of Sofia. The church was proclaimed a cultural monument in 1924. The bell tower is almost 53 m high and has 12 church bells which were cast and brought here from Moscow. Some of the most exquisite Bulgarian icons are displayed in the church crypt.

The St. Kyriaki Cathedral

The monumental cathedral of the Sofia Diocese; the cathedral of St. Kyriaki, is situated on a square of the same name, located in the very centre of Sofia. The church is associated with the date of 16 April 1925, when the largest terrorist attack for that time took place inside the building, causing the death of 193 people and about 500 injuries. Today the church is home to the remains of the Serbian king Stefan Milutin.

The Church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker (the Russian Church)

is among the most beautiful Christian churches in Bulgaria and is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. At the beginning of the 20th century the church became a spiritual centre for thousands of Russian immigrants. Seraphim Sobelev, archbishop of the Russian Orthodox parishes in Bulgaria, also served here. He was buried in the church crypt and in spite of not being canonized; today he is still venerated as a saint in Bulgaria.

The Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph

The history of the co-cathedral of St. Joseph dates back to 1875. In 1944, during the Second World War, its construction was mostly completed, however on 30 March 1944 the cathedral was destroyed in a bomb attack. In 2002 Pope John Paul II laid the foundation stone of the new church at the previous location of the church. Today St. Joseph is the largest Roman Catholic cathedral in Bulgaria.



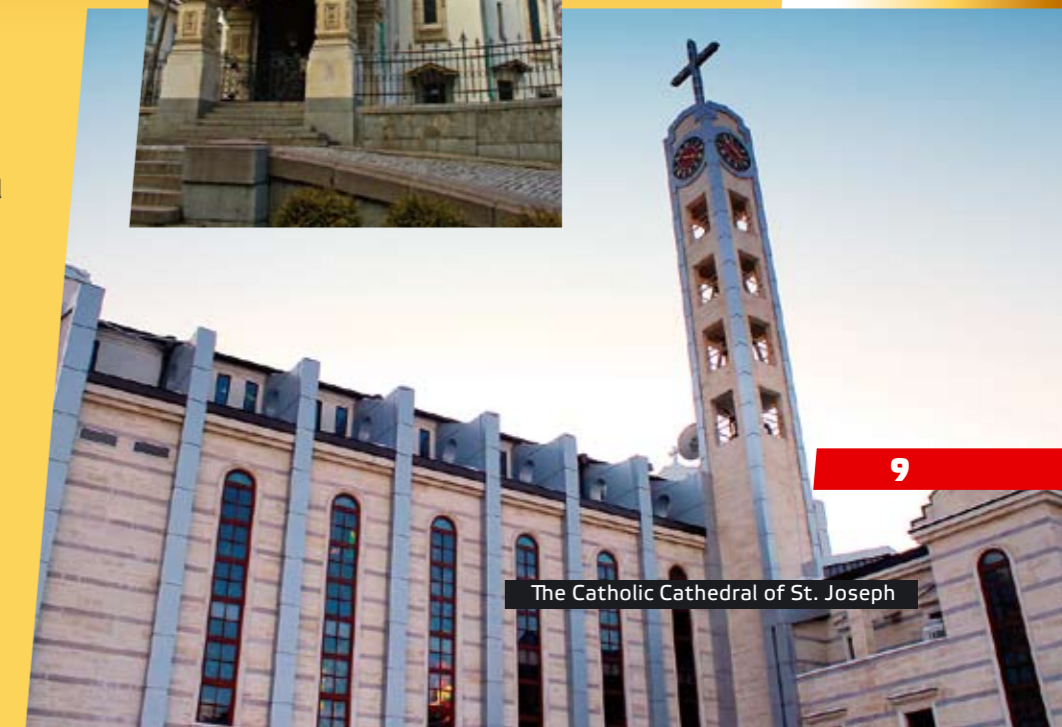
The St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral



The St. Kyriaki Cathedral



The Church of St. Nicholas the Wonderworker



The Catholic Cathedral of St. Joseph

Map of Monasteries in Bulgaria



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- 41 Ustrem Monastery
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- 43 Gigintsi Monastery
- 44 Kapinovo Monastery
- ⊕ Other monasteries in Bulgaria
- ✈ Airport
- ⚓ Port
- 🚧 Border crossing point

The Holy Monasteries – Masterpieces of Bulgarian Architecture, Art and Culture

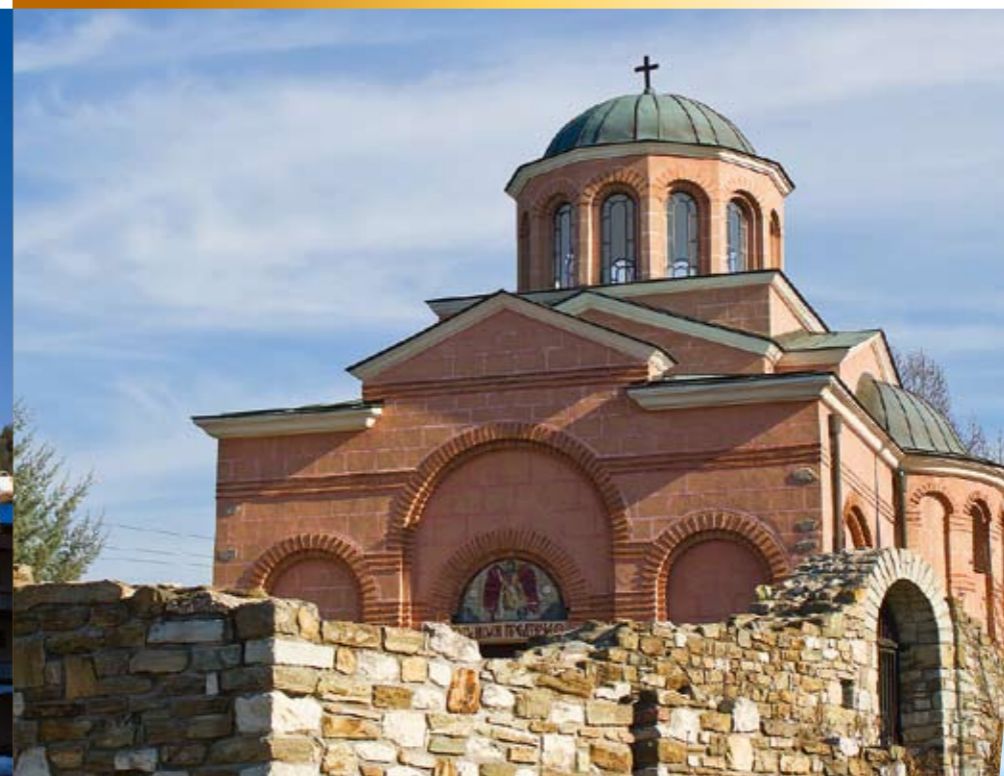


In the Rila mountain range lies the most outstanding monument of Bulgarian architecture and art; **the Rila Monastery St. John of Rila**. Its foundation is associated with the life and ministry of the Bulgarian hermit St. John of Rila (10th century), called the greatest of all Bulgarian saints in the hagiologies of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. During the First Kingdom the monastery became one of the centres of spiritual culture in Bulgaria. It was built at its present location in the 14th century, when the protosevast Dragovol Hrelyo settled here as an independent feudal lord and ordered the construction of a five-floor defense tower (the Tower of Hrelyo); a significant monument of Bulgarian medieval architecture. It is a survivor of the Ottoman invasion, being completely burnt down in a violent fire in 1833, the monastery

was rebuilt in its present form between 1834 and 1851 without a chief master builder or prior planning. The murals in the main monastery church were painted between 1840 and 1848 by the best Bulgarian Revival fine arts painters of that time. The monastery library houses thousands of manuscripts and old printed books, the oldest dating back to the 10th century. Raphael's Cross and the repousse cover of the Krupnik Gospel, housed in the monastery, are considered masterworks of wood carving. An object of outstanding interest is the central wooden iconostasis, displayed in the main monastery church. Its size and composition are unrivalled in the entire Bulgarian wood carving tradition. The Rila monastery also houses the ancient miraculous icon of the Holy Theotokos Hodegetria, which, according to the church legend, Maria, the sister of the Bulgarian ruler Tsar Ivan Shishman (1371-1395) and wife of Sultan Murat I (1326-1389), presented as a gift to the monastery. The icon has 32 separate rectangular boxes holding the relics of different saints.



The Mysteries of Southern Bulgaria



The Church Complex of the Dormition of the Theotokos in Kardzhali

The church complex of the Dormition of the Theotokos is situated in the southern part of the town of Kardzhali, not far from the Kardzhali Reservoir. Unique discoveries testify to its transformation into a bishopric back in the 9th-10th centuries. Due to its artistic and architectural importance, the complex has been proclaimed a national monument of culture.

The Rozhen Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos

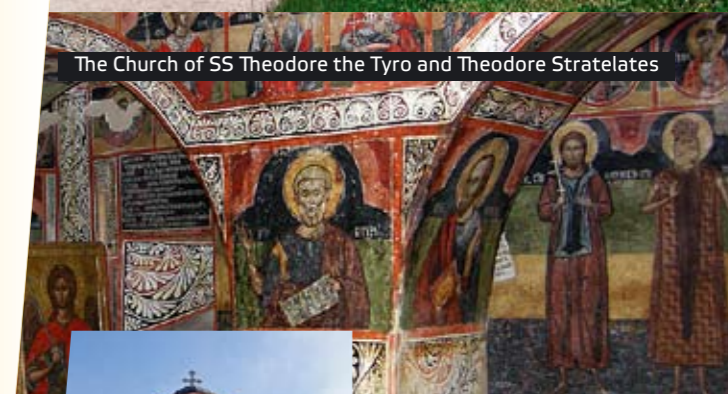
In the area around Bulgaria's smallest town Melnik, situated about 170 km south of Sofia, lies the Rozhen Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos (12th-13th centuries). The monastery was often frequented by the activists of the Internal Macedonian Revolutionary Organisation who had committed their lives to the liberation of the Bulgarian territories remaining under Ottoman rule until 1912.



The Rozhen Monastery of the Nativity of the Theotokos

The Church of SS Theodore the Tyro and Theodore Stratelates

(17th century) in the village of Dobarsko, close to the winter resort of Bansko, has been proclaimed a UNESCO protected cultural monument. The church's authentic architecture and murals place it among the most precious examples of Bulgarian art.



The Church of SS Theodore the Tyro and Theodore Stratelates

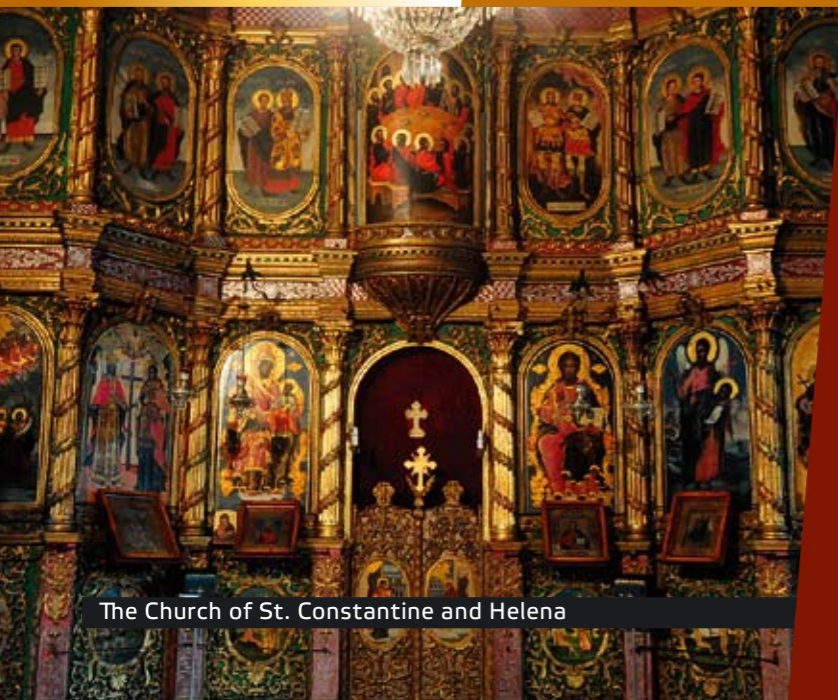
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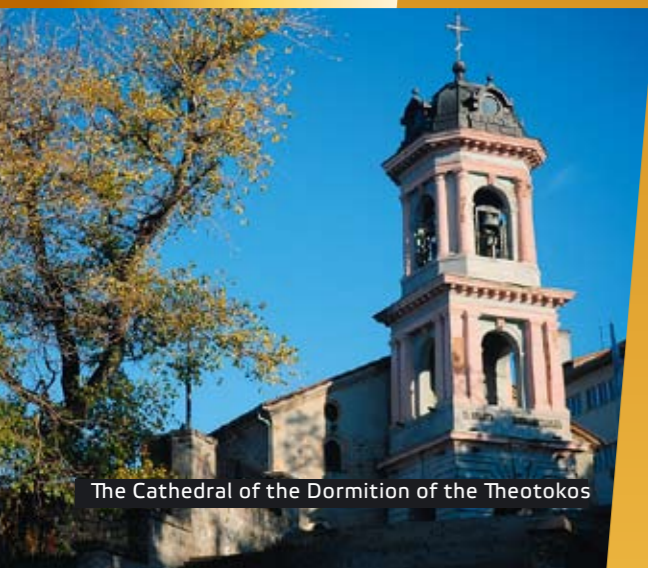
Christian Monuments in and around the City of Plovdiv



The Church of St. Constantine and Helena

Plovdiv

The city which lies on the two banks of the Maritsa River, on the Upper Thracian Plain, has always fascinated its visitors with its shining antiquity, medieval charm with Oriental features, and unique Revival and Baroque architecture. Numerous Christian churches were built in the city well before the liberation from Ottoman rule in 1878, which have kept their original appearance until the present time. Among them are the church of St. Constantine and Helena, built in 1832, the church of St. Marina and many more. A precious example of early Baroque art in the church of St. Constantine and Helena is the gold plated iconostasis in the Viennese style.



The Cathedral of the Dormition of the Theotokos

The Catholic Cathedral of St. Louis in Plovdiv

The cathedral was built in the 1850s. In 1861 the first organ in Bulgaria was installed here. The belfry, equipped with 5 bells, a gift from Pope Leo XIII, was erected in 1898. The Bulgarian princess, Marie Louise, the first wife of King Ferdinand, was buried inside the cathedral.

Many early Christian churches have been discovered in the area around Plovdiv. When the Slavs crossed the Danube and settled on the Balkan Peninsula in the 6th-7th centuries, they found the churches and monasteries of the local Christian people here. The biggest proof of the Christian practices of those times are the remains of the Red Church (5th-6th centuries) near Perushtitsa, the basilica of the Holy Savior near Belovo, as well as many others.



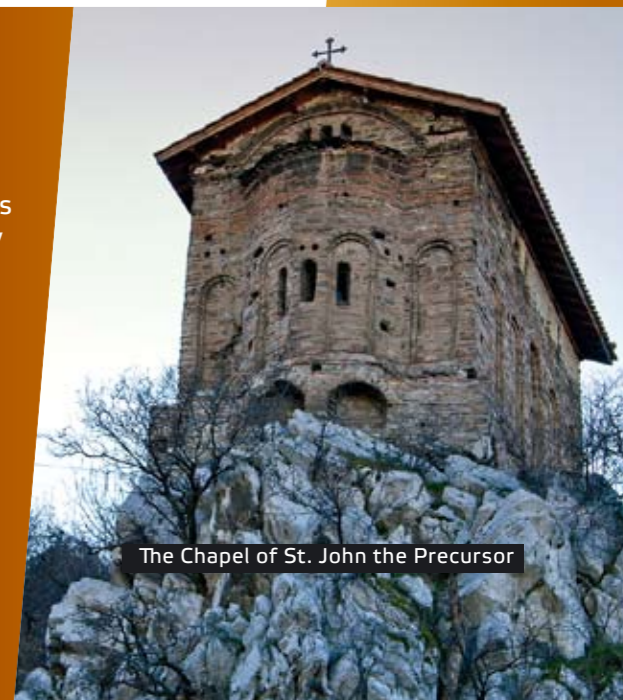
The Red Church near Perushtitsa



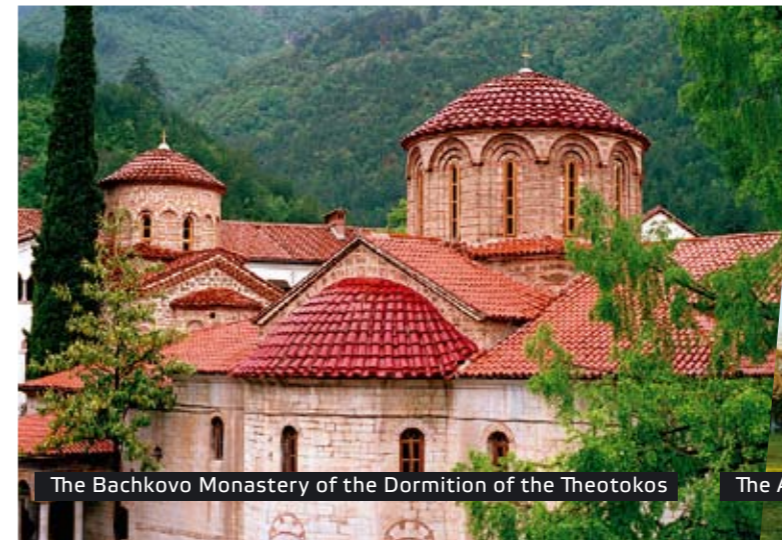
The Catholic Cathedral of St. Louis

The Holy Mountain of the Rhodopes

Asenovgrad is also known as the gateway to the Rhodope mountains. The town lies in southern Bulgaria, 15 km away from Plovdiv. The area is quite fascinating due to a unique combination of natural beauty and cultural and historic heritage. The monasteries and the many churches and chapels around Asenovgrad have given the area the name of the Holy Mountain of the Rhodopes. They are also the source of the other nickname of Asenovgrad; the Bulgarian Jerusalem. Some of the most impressive examples of the Bulgarian Medieval architecture can be found here; the church of the Holy Theotokos of Petrich in Asen's Fortress, dating from the 11th century, the chapel of St. John the Precursor, the church called Holy Theotokos - Annunciation and many others. The Holy Mountain of the Rhodopes also includes several monasteries, among which are the monasteries of Bachkovo, Kuklen, Muldava and Voden, as well as the only Bulgarian monastery constructed during Ottoman rule, the Arapovo Monastery (1856).



The Chapel of St. John the Precursor



The Bachkovo Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos



The Arapovo Monastery of St. Kyriaki near Asenovgrad

The Bachkovo Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos

Right next to the village of Bachkovo, about 9 km from Asenovgrad, lies the Bachkovo Monastery of the Dormition of the Theotokos, proclaimed a world cultural heritage site. The monastery was founded in 1083, and the only surviving building of that time is the two-floor ossuary. It is decorated with exquisite murals, the most precious of which are the portraits of the founders of the monastery, painted at the end of the 11th and the beginning of the 12th centuries. The oldest monastery building is the church of SS Michael and Gabriel the Archangels (12th-13th centuries). One of Bulgaria's most precious Christian relics, the miraculous icon of the Holy Theotokos, is housed in the monastery. The entire icon is plated in gold and silver, and depicts the holy Theotokos and the infant Jesus Christ.

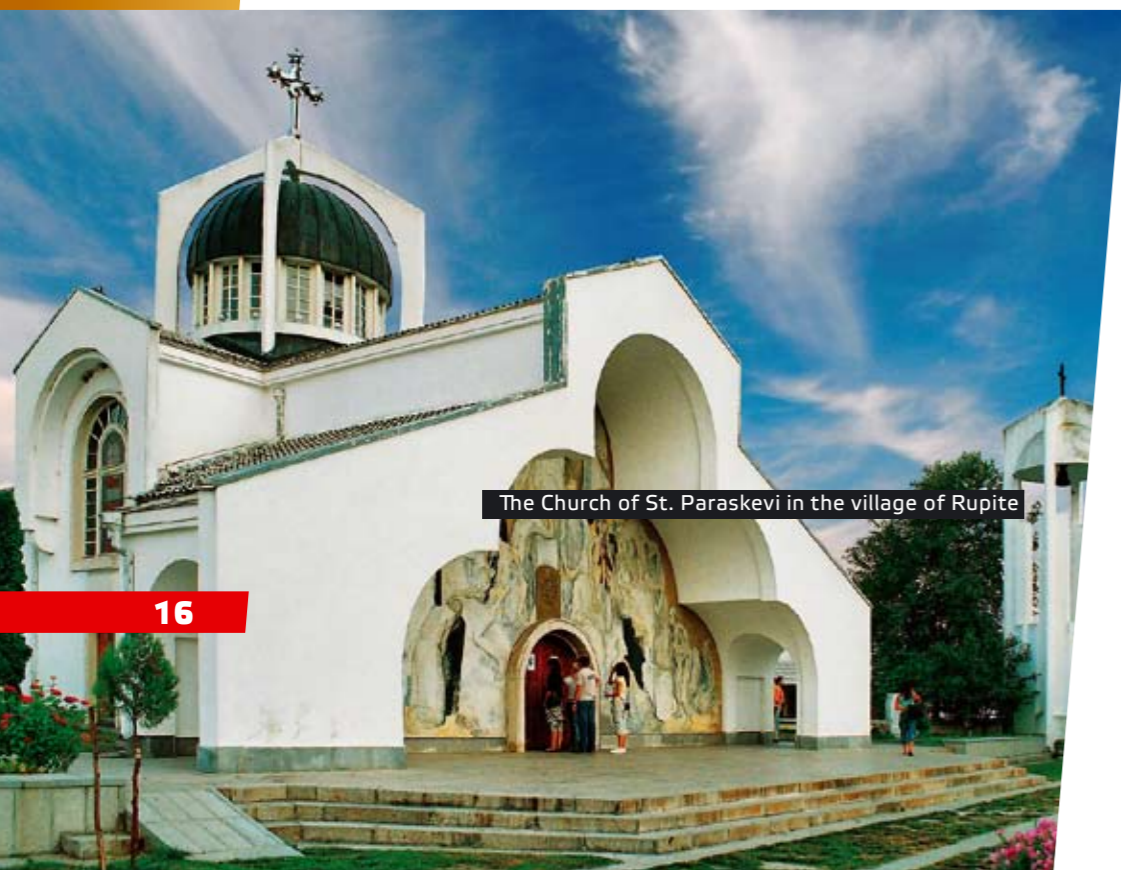
The Mountain of the Cross



The Monastery Complex of the Holy Trinity

A swaying sea of forests, bagpipe sounds and chants, the Rhodope Mountains have been venerated as Bulgaria's sacred land from ancient times. The Byzantine chroniclers used to call them Magna Silva Bulgarica (the Great Bulgarian forest). Here, 45 km away from Asenovgrad, lies the Gradishte area, also known as the Mountain of the Cross. Looking back we discover the history of the mountain interwoven with ancient myths and legends. Legend has it that buried here lay a part of the cross of Christ which was found by Constantine the Great and his mother Helena and taken to Constantinople. Another legend talks of a big icon with inlaid parts of the cross of Christ, brought here to avoid desecration by the Ottoman invaders. The icon was later buried in the foothills of the Mountain of the Cross. About 300 monks were killed here during the mass conversion to Islam of the Mid-Rhodopes in the 18th century. But nothing could extinguish the Christian faith in the holiness of the mountain. Each year on the night of 13th September, the most popular religious event in Bulgaria takes place here when thousands of pilgrims gather on the hill for a nighttime liturgy and pray for health and prosperity.

The Rupite Area



The Church of St. Paraskevi in the village of Rupite

On the territory of the village of Rupite, situated in southwestern Bulgaria and about 8 km. north of the town of Petrich, at the foot of Kozhuh Hill, lies the well-known Rupite area. The area abounds in mineral springs and pools. An attractive site is the church of St. Paraskevi, built according to the wishes of the Bulgarian fortune teller Vanga. Each year a traditional council is held here on the feast day of 15th August (Dormition of the Theotokos). The Rupite area, together with the church of St. Paraskevi the Bulgarian, is one of the 100 national tourist sites of the Bulgarian Tourist Union.

A Tour of the Black Sea Region



The Church of the Holy Theotokos of Pagania



The Cathedral of the Dormition of the Theotokos

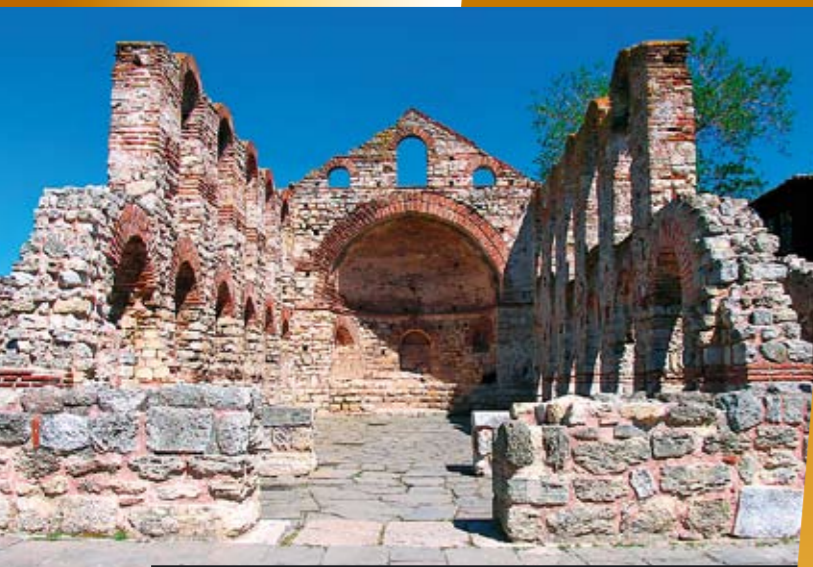
Varna – the Sea Capital of Bulgaria
Varna's location and the abundance of natural resources have turned the northern part of the Black Sea into an attractive resort for Europeans and the entire Black Sea region. Today Varna is the seat of the bishoprics of Varna and Veliki Preslav and home to over 300 Orthodox churches. The cathedral of the Holy Dormition of the Theotokos is one of the city's emblems, and was the first Christian monument built in memory and to the glory of the victims of the Russo-Trukish War of 1877-1878 who fell for the liberation of Bulgaria. The oldest active church in Varna is the church of the Holy Theotokos of Pagania built in early 1602; housing a miraculous icon of the Holy Theotokos.



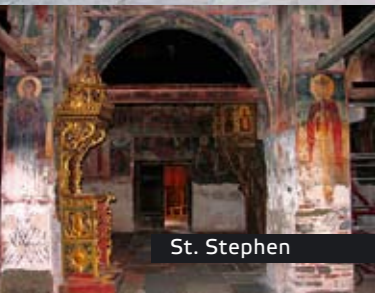
The Aladzha Monastery

The Aladzha Monastery is located about 15 km north of the city of Varna and is the most well-known cave monastery on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. The name Aladzha is of mixed Persian and Turkish origin and means bright and colourful, possibly referring to the few remaining murals. The same type of soft rock-hewn monastery can also be found on other Black Sea coastlines such as the Crimean Peninsula and in Georgia. Records of monastic life here date back to the 11th and 12th centuries. The murals in the remaining chambers are from the 14th century. The catacombs, the basilica and the entire cave complex are believed to have been among the earliest functioning Christian centres of the 4th-6th centuries on the sea coast.

The Secrets of the Southern Black Sea



The Church of St. Sophia



St. Stephen



Christ Pantocrator

Nesebar

The ancient sea town of Nesebar is situated in southeastern Bulgaria on a small rocky peninsula in the northern part of Burgas Bay, just 35 km north of the second largest city on the Black Sea coast; Burgas. Nesebar is home to precious remnants of all periods of its thousand-year-long history: old fortification walls from Roman and Medieval times, Byzantine and old Bulgarian churches, old houses from the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the most impressive structures in Nesebar is the basilica of the Holy Theotokos Eleusa (5th-6th centuries), housing the icon of the Theotokos which was discovered here. Other interesting sites are the three-apsed basilica of St. Sophia, also known as the Old Bishopric, the church of Christ Pantocrator and the church of St. Stephen, which houses murals with high artistic value from the 16th century.

Sozopol

The pretty Bulgarian sea town of Sozopol is situated on a small peninsula in the southernmost part of Burgas Bay, 36 km from the city of Burgas. It is connected to the mainland via a small strip just 100 m wide standing at 10 m above sea level. Also known as Apollonia, Sozopol is not only the oldest town on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, but maybe also the one with the most archaeological discoveries. In 2010 the discovery of some of the remains of St. John the Baptist on Sveti Ivan island attracted the interest of thousands of local and international pilgrims. The remains are kept in the church of St. George in Sozopol, which is also home to a part of the Holy Cross and the relics of St. Andrew. Other interesting sites are the church of the Holy Theotokos of the 15th century, proclaimed a UNESCO world heritage site, the church of St. Zosima (1857) and many more.



The Church of St. John the Precursor in Sozopol



The Relics of St. John the Baptist

A Trip to the Holy Places of Other Religious Communities

Records of contacts between the population of the land which is currently Bulgaria and Islam date back to the second half of the 7th century, when Constantinople was twice besieged by Arab troops. Today about 80% of the Turks in Bulgaria live in either of two fairly well defined zones in northeastern and southeastern Bulgaria.

The Djumaya Mosque (15th century)

The Djumaya Mosque is located in the centre of Plovdiv and according to the legend it was built on the site of the old Christian church of St. Paraskevi. There is a sun dial on the outer wall at the southwestern corner.

The Baykarli Mosque (19th century)

The Baykarli Mosque in the town of Samokov has been proclaimed a national monument of culture.

The Bulgarian Jews

Information about a Jewish presence in Bulgaria dates to the time of the First Bulgarian Kingdom (681-1018)... During the Second World War Bulgaria saved almost 50 000 Jews from the concentration camps of Nazi Germany. The deportation of the Jewish community was prevented by the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Parliament and the Tsar.

The Central Synagogue of Sofia

The Central Synagogue of Sofia is the largest Sephardic (Spanish-Jewish) synagogue in Europe and a symbol of the Jews in Bulgaria. It houses the offices of the Chief Rabbi of Bulgaria and the Chief Rabbi of Sofia. The Sofia Synagogue used to house the esteemed Judaic library of the Sofia community, including a priceless collection of Medieval Rabbinic writings which was destroyed in bomb attacks during the Second World War.



The Djumaya Mosque



The Baykarli Mosque



The Central Synagogue of Sofia

Church Feasts and Traditions



The Bulgarian Orthodox Church follows the Gregorian Calendar, also known as the New Style. The Church Year begins on 1st September, which is the Beginning of the *Indiction* (*indiction*: government rule announcing the beginning of the New Year). Depending on the time of the annual cycle when feasts are celebrated, they can be fixed and moveable.

The biggest of all moveable feasts is Easter (Resurrection of Christ, or Pascha).

The feast date can vary from year to year depending on the first full moon in the spring season. The Divine Liturgy starts late in the evening on Great and Holy Saturday. Before midnight all candles inside the church are extinguished, and after saying Christ is Risen the priest lights a flame from which everyone can light their candles. The Bulgarian Easter meal is rich and always includes roast lamb, kozunak (sweet bread) and red Easter eggs.

The other brightest and most celebrated feast, second only to Pascha, is the Nativity of Christ (25th December). On Christmas Eve the whole family gathers for a humble and meatless dinner in imitation of the manger and modest circumstances of the birth of Jesus Christ, while some small towns and villages practice the tradition of Koleduvane, which involves young boys dressed in national costumes who visit the homes of other families, sing joyous songs and receive fruit and ring-shaped loaves as gifts from their hosts.

The third big Christian feast is the feast of St. Basil the Great (1st January). The feast meal on this day is plentiful and always includes banitsa with lucky charms. Survakane is a joyful national tradition involving children who hit the adults lightly on the back with decorated cornel sticks and say special good wishes for healthiness, longevity and good harvest in the New Year. Traditional Kukeri gatherings also take place on this day and involve people of all ages carrying national costumes and masks to chase away evil spirits.



Traditional Kukeri gathering

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USEFUL INFORMATION

Location: The Republic of Bulgaria is a country in Europe, located in the eastern part of the Balkan Peninsula. To the east Bulgaria borders with the Black Sea, to the south with Greece and Turkey, to the west with FYROM and Serbia and to the north with Romania.

Territory: 110,994 km²

Population (information from NSI): 7,351,234 (as of 1.02.2011)

Climate: average winter temperature: between 0 and 2°C

Average summer temperature: about 20 and 22°C

Official language: Bulgarian

Alphabet: Cyrillic

Highest point: peak of Musala (2,925 m)

Time zone: GMT (London) +2 (EST+7)

Capital city: Sofia

Currency: Bulgarian lev (1 EUR=1.955 BGN))

Administrative Division: 28 districts, 264 municipalities

Important telephone numbers:

Medical emergency: 150

Fire Emergency: 160

Police: 166

Mountain Rescue Service: +359 8881470 или +2 9632000

General European Emergency Call: 112

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FEATURES ALL YEAR

