

## *Nature and Culture in Bulgaria*

### **Self-guided Tour 12 days/11 nights**



**Summary:** This tour is designed for nature lovers and those who would like to discover Bulgaria in a different way. The Rhodope mountains are in the south of the country, forming a vast range where people have lived since ancient times, people of different cultures, such as Christians and Muslims, who still live together peacefully. The mountains are a model for responsible tourism in Bulgaria and the locals are keen to welcome you and teach you about picking herbs and plants, their cooking and their daily work in the fields to keep a traditional way of life intact. The tour shows you also the highlights of the Thracian culture, starting from its megalithic sanctuaries to the refined art of the tomb paintings to the incredible ancient sites as Perperikon. Through the Rose Valley and the Valley of the Thracian Kings you will cross the Balkan Mountains at the historic Shipka Pass. In Triavna, Etara, Bojentsi and Arbanasi, you learn more about Bulgaria's Revival Period (18-19th century) – its architecture, art, and traditions. In the medieval capital Veliko Tarnovo we feel the spirit of former Bulgarian glories (12-14th C). On the last days of this trip you visit Troyan Monastery and end the tour with a sightseeing walk in Sofia.

## **Tour information**

**Duration:** 12 days/11 nights

**Type :** self guided nature-observation and cultural trip

**Price per person:** 699 € / (valid for a group of 2 people)

### **The price includes:**

- accommodation in family-run 3\* hotels /in Ruse 4\* hotel/
- 11 breakfasts and 6 dinners
- all wildlife observation and activities mentioned in the itinerary

## **Day by day itinerary:**

### **Day 1: The Rhodope Mountains and the narrow – gauge train**



Early morning drive to the heart of Bulgaria – Rhodope Mountains. You follow the emblematic narrow-gauge line (only 760mm wide) through the valleys and gorges between Rila and Rhodope mountains. Due to the characteristics of the route through the mountains, the line is also known as the Alpine railway in the Balkans. Avramovo station, situated at 1267 meters above the sea, is the highest station in the Balkans.

Short after Bansko you can make a short detour and visit Dobarsko village, hidden in the southern foots of Rila Mountains. The village is known for its vibrant folklore andwith thepeculiar frescos of its 17th-century church.

During the drive you can stop for a short coffee break in Yakoruda town, where you can meet the Bulgarian Muslim Ethnicity and get to know a bit more about their traditional way of living.



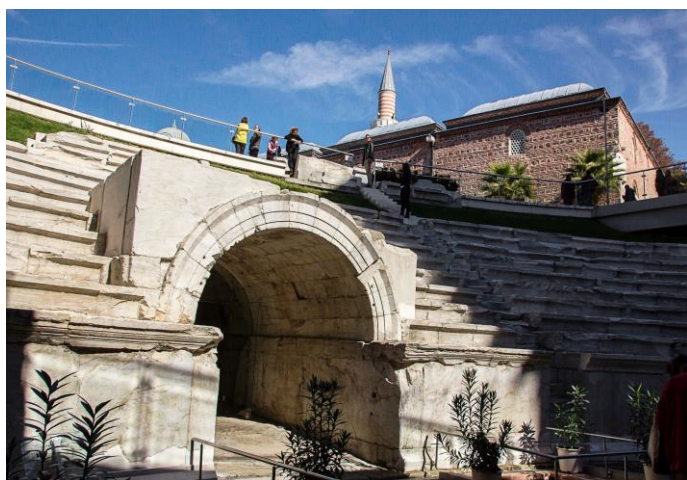
In the early afternoon arrival in Plovdiv. Accommodation in a small hotel very close to the city center. Dinner at your expense.

**Night stop:** Plovdiv

**Accommodation:** Hotel [Ego](#)\*\*\*

**Included Meals:** no

## Day 2: Plovdiv



Plovdiv's history spans 6,000 years, ranking it among the world's oldest cities. You can see the ancient Roman theatre, the Roman Stadium, the archaeological complex Nebet tepe, remains of the medieval walls and towers and a well-preserved old quarter from the National Revival period with beautiful houses, churches and narrow paved streets. No doubt that Plovdiv is the country's most visited and beautiful town. Plovdiv was voted for European cultural capital 2019.

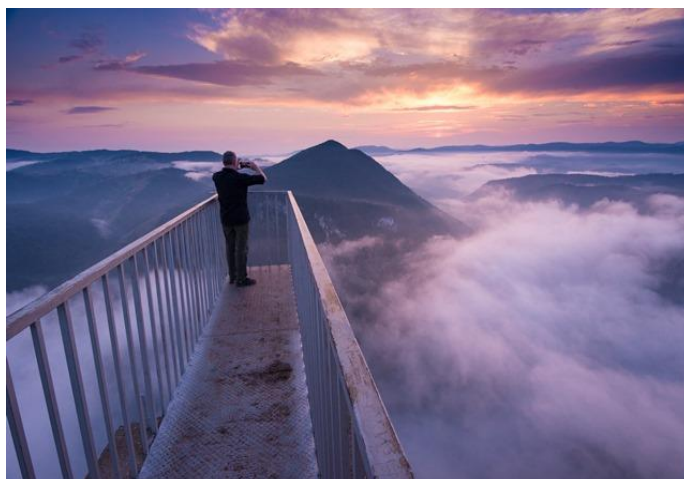
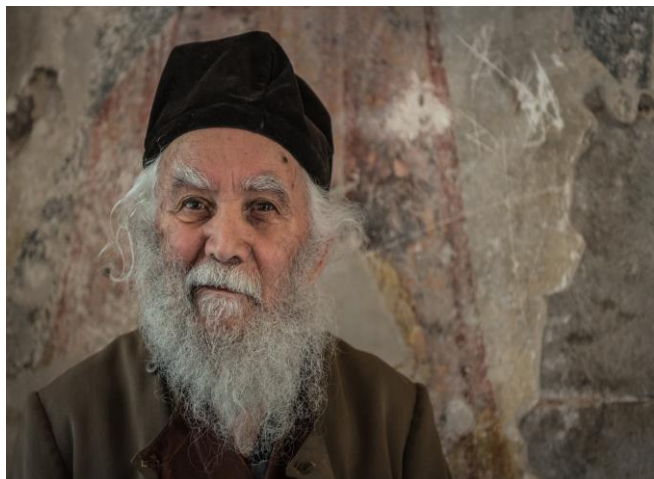
In the afternoon you can drive short /20 km/ to see the monumental tomb complex on the Maltepe tumulus /3rd century/. While the research work is still going on, it was confirmed that the stone tower was at least 26 metres high and at its peak, there was a pedestal bearing a statue several metres high. It is the highest open tomb in Europe with this type of pyramid structure, and it is even possible it turns out to be a worldwide unique discovery.

**Night stop:** Plovdiv

**Accommodation:** Hotel [Ego](#)\*\*\*

**Included Meals:** breakfast

## Day 3: Batschkovo monastery and Trigrad Gorge



After breakfast drive through the vast Rodopi Mountains and head to the second largest Bulgarian monastery – Bachkovo Monastery. It was founded in the 11<sup>th</sup> century and is very renowned because of its miraculous icon in the main church, which attracts hundreds of pilgrims each year. You can do a short hike above the monastery - to the sacred spring called “Aiazmo” and the rock hewn chapel above it.

Drive further to Trigrad village. In the afternoon you can do a short hike in the Trigrad Gorge and visit the Devil’s Throat Cave (famous with its high underground waterfall) and Yagidina cave. There is a walking route from Yagodina village to the panoramic platform Eagle’s Eye, raises 670 m above the picturesque Buynovsko gorge.

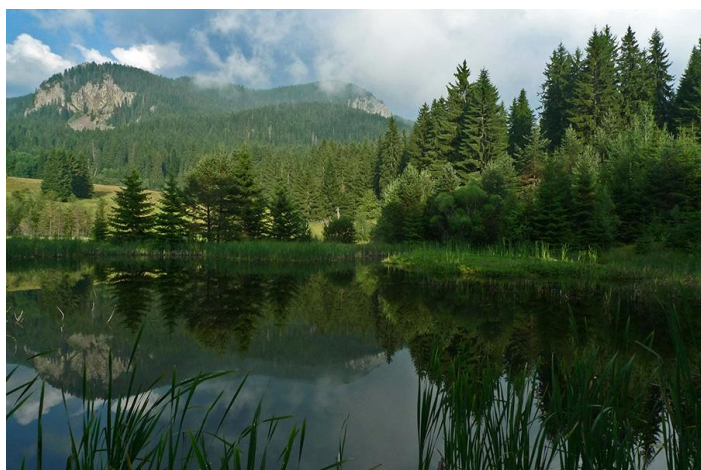
Enjoy a traditional meal for dinner at the guesthouse “Silivryak” in Trigrad.

**Night stop:** Trigrad village

**Accommodation:** Family-run guesthouse “Silivryak”

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, dinner

#### **Day 4: Bear-watching and bird watching in Western Rhodope Mountains**





During the day you can hike to the Chairi Lakes /approx.. 6 hours hiking/ and observe the bird biodiversity of the region, consisting of 141 nesting species, 68 of which are endangered. Among them are the Corn Crake, the Saker Falcon and the Lesser Kestrel (SPEC 1). Furthermore this territory is of great importance for the conservation of the Goldcrest, Black Woodpecker, Hazel Hen, the Western Capercaillie, Grey-headed Woodpecker, the Peregrine Falcon, the Golden Eagle, etc.

Dinner at the gusethouse. At sunset the local guide Vlado comes and you make a short transfer with 4×4 jeeps and then a walk in the forest to reach the best observation point. In order to observe bears in their natural habitat you will stay in a special hideout. Return back to Trigrad for overnight – this can be very late and it depends on you how long we stay in the hideouts.

**Night stop:** Trigrad village

**Accommodation:** Family-run guesthouse “Silivryak”

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, dinner

## Day 5: Nature and culture in East Rodopi Mountains



Transfer from Trigrad to the Eastern Rhodope Mountains. This will be a long transfer /around 240 Km, approx. 5 hours/, which will show you much of Bulgaria's nature and culture. On the way you can stop in Ardino and see the so called Devil's Bridge. Constructed in the early 16th century, the bridge, also known in Turkish as “Sheytan Kyupriya”, is the most stunning of the humpbacked bridges that cross the Arda River in Bulgaria. Another “Must see” near Ardino is the Thracian sanctuary “Eagle Rocks”, located about 4 km south of the town. The cult complex, dates back to 6<sup>th</sup>-4<sup>th</sup> century B. C., presents a large rock, in which are cut about 90 trapezoidal niches, used for rituals and burials.

Another of the today's highlights is the region around Kardjali. You can make a stopover for a visit of the natural phenomenon “The Stone mushrooms”. Further you can walk into the steps of the ancient Thracians in their fortress Perperikon (15km from Kardjali). It is the largest megalith ensemble site in the Balkans and here you will find traces of all times since its construction in 4th

c. B.C. to its downfall in 14th c. It is thought that a famous Temple of Dionysius was located at Perperikon during the classical era.

Drive further to Gorno Pole village. A warm welcome awaits you at the Wild Farm, a hotspot for all bird watchers and the story of the family that manages the farm is just as captivating. Enjoy a traditional meal for dinner and don't miss to try the home-made rakia (Bulgarian brandy) of Nikolai – your host!

**Night stop:** Gorno Pole Village

**Accommodation:** Family-run farm [“The Wild Farm”](#)

**Included Meals:** Breakfast and Dinner

## Day 6: Bird watching in Madjarovo area



Early in the morning you do a vultures observation tour with a local guide Marin Kurtev. The Madjarovo area is a true paradise for nature lovers. A large part of it is declared a nature reserve which provides good living conditions for its inhabitants, including 4 types of vulture, the Golden Eagle, the Black Stork and the wolf. You can observe also Long-legged Buzzards, Golden and Short-toed Eagles, Peregrine Falcons.

In the afternoon you can choose between a half day hiking tour with a local guide or kayaking adventures in the waters of Arda River.

You can also visit the nearby Borislavtsi village where you can visit a small atelier for home-made sesame oil and butter (an old Bulgarian tradition).

**Night stop:** Gorno Pole Village

**Accommodation:** Family-run farm [“The Wild Farm”](#)

**Included Meals:** Breakfast and Dinner



## Day 7: Aleksandrovo and Kasanlak Tombs and Central Balkan range



A long, but interesting transfer takes you north of the Balkan mountain. Don't miss to stop at the ancient Thracian stone circle of Goliam Glavanak and the Thracian tumulus of Aleksandrovo, dated to 4th century B.C. Remarkable is the fresco in the main chamber, depicts a hunting scene where a boar is attacked by a mounted hunter and a naked man wielding a double-axe.

Your next stop is the town of Kasanlak in the so called Valley of the Thracian Kings. Here you can visit the famous Kasanlak tomb, a UNESCO World Heritage Site from 4<sup>th</sup> c. B.C. The tomb owes its global fame to the remarkable wall-paintings – one of the best preserved products of the antique painting from the early Hellenistic age. Other interesting tombs near Kasanlak are "Ostrusha" and "Goliam Kosmatka", famous for the golden treasure found in them.

You cross the Balkan Mountains at the historic Shipka Pass. It is the place where the final battle against the Ottomans took place (1877-8). It is the place where Bulgarian Liberation was won. After a break on the top of the hill with the monument you continue and soon reach the pretty little village of Sabotkovtsi, located 5km from the Architectural Reserve "Bozhentsi". Your next accommodation – guest house "Staroto Shkolo" /The Old School/ offers a warm welcome and delicious dinner, with products from their own farming.

**Night stop:** Sabotkovtsi

**Accommodation:** Family-run hotel "[Staroto Shkolo](#)" /The Old School/

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, dinner

## Day 8: Explore Rural Bulgaria and the Charms of the Revival Period



After breakfast you can take part in various tasks around the farm, do a cooking lesson, ride a horse or a bicycle /those activities are not included in total price, ask the host Eli for details/ or hike in the beautiful gorge of Yantra river.

In the afternoon you can do a walk through the Old Town of Triavna. It is a town where traditions are kept alive and you can benefit from this! The local woodcarving museum is a real treasure. You can visit Etara - the only Bulgarian open-air museum, which shows traditional life, architecture and crafts from the Revival Period – 18-19<sup>th</sup> century, or drive to Sokolski Monastery, a nunnery peacefully set in hills above Etara and overlooks the valley. The monastery church is a good example of local architecture from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.

**Night stop:** Sabotkovtsi

**Accommodation:** Family-run hotel ["Staroto Shkolo" /The Old School/](#)

**Included Meals:** Breakfast, dinner

## Day 9: The Medieval Capital Veliko Tarnovo & Arbanassi Revival Architecture Reserve





After breakfast short drive to the Old Capital of Bulgaria – Veliko Tarnovo. The town is famous for its medieval castle-fortress called “Tzarevets”, rising amidst the meanders of the Yantra river, and the craftsman’s street “Samovodska charshia”. There you can observe the craftsman in action. Veliko Tarnovo will encharm you with its steep cobbled streets and its dynamic art life.

In the afternoon, you can visit Arbanassi village, situated on a nearby hill. The village is declared architectural reserve with houses representing the Bulgarian Renaissance from 17-18th century. The most outstanding house-museum in the village is Konstantzaliev’s house-museum. At the end of our tour we will visit the “Nativity of the Virgin” church with its beautiful frescoes.

**Night stop:** Veliko Tranovo

**Accommodation:** Family-run hotel [“Gurko”](#) in the old town /site under constuction currently/

**Included Meals:** Breakfast

## Day 10: Ivanovo rock hewn churches /UNESCO/ and Ruse



Today you drive further north, where the Danube river composes the border between Bulgaria and Romania. Approx. 20 km. north of Veliko Tarnovo you can see the ruins of Nicopolis ad Istrum – a Roman and Early Byzantine town, founded by Trajan around 102–106 in memory of his victory in the Dacian Wars.

On your way you can also visit Rusenski lom Nature park and medieval Rock-hewn Churches of Ivanovo. This is a group of monolithic churches, chapels and monasteries hewn out of solid rock and noted for its beautiful and well-preserved medieval frescoes from 13-14 Century.

In the early afternoon arrival in Ruse - one of the most beautiful towns in Bulgaria, also dubbed Little Vienna, because of its Neo-Baroque and Neo-Rococo architecture (19<sup>th</sup>–20<sup>th</sup> century) and its many museums. Ruse is also a birthplace of Elias Canetti, the winner of the Nobel Prize for Literature (1981). You can visit Sexaginta Prista Roman fortress and the archeological

Museum in Ruse. Sexaginta Prista or “City of 60 ships” (sexaginta means 60 in Latin and pristis is a Greek word for a special river guard ship) was a part of a major Roman fortification system along the Danube river. The defence walls of the fortress are still visible, and so are the tower and the barracks, while some artefacts (inscriptions, sculptures, tombstones) are kept in a German WW 2 bunker. In the Regional History Museum you can have a look at the famous Borovo Silver Treasure (383–359 BC), a ritual Thracian wine set of five gold-plated silver items, discovered in 1974.

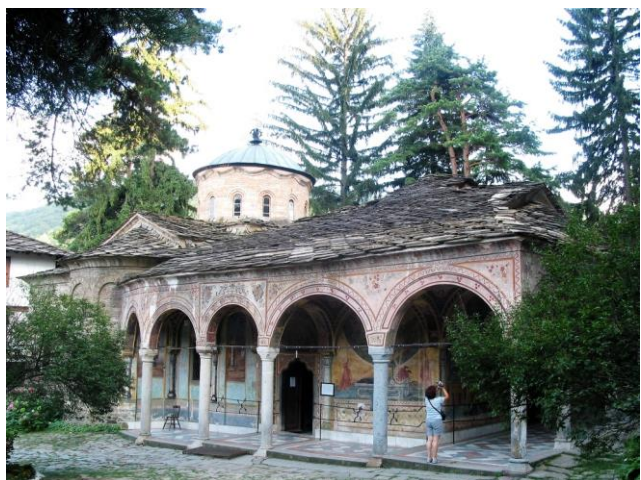
Overnight in [Anna Palace](#) hotel. Build in 1888 as a home of wealthy merchant, in the following years the house changed owner several times. The Italian Consulate was located there, followed by the Austro-Hungarian and the Romanian. Since 1952 it has been used by the History Museum and since 2003 the bright-yellow neoclassical mansion just up from the river is one of the best hotels in the city.

**Night stop:** Ruse

**Accommodation:** 4\* hotel “[Anna Palace](#)” in the city center

**Included Meals:** Breakfast

## Day 11: Troyan monastery and Prohodna cave



Transfer to Troyan Monastery set on the foot of the Balkan Mountains. This is the third largest monastery in the country. After the visit we can make an optional walk in the vicinity. Transfer further to Sofia. On the way we can stop for a short walk to the amazing Prohodna cave. The cave is known for the two eye-like holes in its ceiling, known as Oknata ( The windows ).

**Night stop:** Sofia

**Accommodation:** [Sofia Place\\*\\*\\*](#) hotel in the city center with parking

**Included Meals:** Breakfast



## Day 12: Sofia



This is the last day of this tour. You can make a sightseeing tour of Sofia and see the main cultural highlights like the Alexander Nevski Cathedral, the Rotunda of St. George, St Sofia Basilika, the Roman Ruins of Serdica and other landmarks of the Bulgarian capital.

**Included Meals:** Breakfast