

# Hiking in Bulgaria

## A Mazama Outing

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May 1-15, 2010

Come to the edge of Europe and discover exotic Bulgaria! The trails of the Balkan and Rodopi mountain ranges will lead you through picturesque mountain villages, across grassy highland meadows spangled with blossoms, and through fragrant woodlands vibrant with the new greenery of spring! Along the cobbled paths of quiet villages tucked away in the folds of the mountains, you can reconnect with “old world Europe.” Revel, too, in Bulgaria’s little-known, yet intriguing cultural heritage. Immerse yourself in the palpable peace of old, orthodox monasteries, and contemplate the frescoes that grace their walls and ceilings—a testimony to the pride and faith of the Bulgarian people. Wander narrow lanes under the overhanging upper stories of the colorful “national revival” houses that crowd the historic center of Plovdiv, Bulgaria’s second city. Explore the vast fortress complex of Tsarevets in Veliko Tarnovo, visit Thracian tombs, and ponder the strange sandstone “pyramids” that surround the old wine-making town of Melnik. Savor the pleasure of an overnight stay in a traditional village *kashta* (“inn”), and in the evenings, step into a Bulgarian *mehana* (“tavern”) where fine food, drink, and music cap off your adventure-filled days. Introduce yourself to Bulgaria! You’ll find that a warm welcome awaits you in this stable and beautiful Balkan country.

**April 30, 2010.** Depart U.S.

**May 1, 2010 (Saturday)**

**Overnight in Sofia**

**Dinner included**

Arrive in Sofia. Transfer to Sveta Sofia Hotel on a pedestrian-only street in the center of the city. A welcome dinner is included this evening.

**May 2, 2010 (Sunday)**

**Overnight in Koprivshtitsa**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Bulgaria’s capital city, Sofia, dates back to Roman times when it was known as *Serdica*. It acquired its current name sometime during the 14th century when it was named for the Church of Sveta Sofia (“Church of Holy Wisdom”). Sofia became Bulgaria’s capital city in 1878 following the country’s liberation from half a millennium of Ottoman rule. This morning, enjoy a walking tour of the principal sights in central Sofia including the Rotunda of Saint George (a chapel dating from the 4th century), the Roman ruins at East Gate, the church of Sveta Sofia, the Ivan Vazov National Theatre and the spectacular, gold-domed Aleksandar Nevski Church. After lunch, travel east from Sofia to the village of Koprivshtitsa, tucked in the forested hills of the Sredna Gora, a low-lying mountain range that lies to the south of the Balkan Mountains, Bulgaria’s principal east-west mountain chain. Enjoy a short stroll past the village’s colorful houses before dinner.

**May 3, 2010 (Monday)**

**Overnight in Kmetovtsi**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

A walking tour along Koprivshtitsa’s cobbled lanes will take you through the core of this lovely mountain village full of some of the finest examples of vernacular architecture in the country. There are almost four hundred houses dating from Bulgaria’s National Revival period (mid-19th century).

You'll visit one of the village's finest houses maintained now as a "house museum." In addition to its architectural noteworthiness, Koprivshtitsa is also revered by Bulgarians as the place where the April 1876 Uprising (against the Ottoman occupation) began. Later, enjoy a half day walk in the surrounding countryside before traveling by vehicle into the Balkan Range which Bulgarians call the *Stara Planina* ("Old Mountains"). On the southern flanks of the mountains, stop to visit the eye-catching, gold-domed Shipka Memorial Cathedral, built in the Russian style to commemorate the nation who helped liberate Bulgaria from Ottoman occupation. Cross the Shipka Pass (where the decisive battle for the Liberation of Bulgaria took place in 1878) before descending the winding road to arrive at the small village of Kmetovtsi in North Bulgaria. Your accommodations for the next three nights are in lovely village hotel built in traditional architectural style. Dinner is served in the tavern of the hotel.

#### **May 4, 2010 (Tuesday)**

##### **Overnight in Kmetovtsi**

##### **Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Today, travel to Arbanassi, one of Bulgaria's most beautiful villages, perched on the slopes overlooking the town of Veliko Târnovo, the medieval capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (12th-14th centuries). In Arbanassi, you'll discover fortress-like houses that were built by the village's wealthy merchants and a medieval church (*Rozhdestvo Hristovo*, or "Church of the Nativity"), outwardly plain but boasting exceptional murals inside. Later, hike the four mile trail to the 11th century Sveta Troitsa ("Holy Trinity") convent situated at the base of limestone cliffs. From the monastery, travel by vehicle to the picturesque city of Veliko Târnovo whose old center is built on a rocky promontory enclosed by the meandering Yantra River. The Bulgarian poet, Ivan Vazov, once described the city's clustered houses as "frightened sheep, bound to the rocks by wild lilac and vines." Enjoy a walking tour through the extensive grounds of the impressive citadel of Tsarevets. Return to Kmetovtsi for dinner and overnight.

#### **May 5, 2010 (Wednesday)**

##### **Overnight in Kmetovtsi**

##### **Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

In the morning visit the six hundred year old village of Bozhentsi tucked in the foothills of the Balkan Range. The entire village was designated an architectural reserve about forty years ago. An optional two and a half hour hike leads through woods and grassy meadows to Tryavna, a 12th century town long known as a center for woodcarving and icon painting. If you don't choose to walk, you can travel by vehicle to Tryavna. There you'll enjoy a stroll in the old center where stone bridges span the stream that runs through the center of town. Here are fine examples of houses from the National Revival period; the Daskalov House is typical of the Tryavna style. Later, travel to the Etâra Open-air Ethnographical Museum outside the town of Gabrovo. The Etâra museum complex preserves the crafts heritage of Gabrovo, a town which in the mid-1800s boasted over 800 workshops powered by waterwheels. Travel back to the village of Kmetovtsi for dinner and overnight.

#### **May 6, 2010 (Thursday)**

##### **Overnight in Plovdiv**

##### **Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Travel by vehicle to the Uzana "alp," an expansive meadowland ringed by oaks at the crest of the Balkan Range. From Uzana, hike across the ridge-top meadows and woodlands of the Central Balkan National Park to Shipka Pass (about 3-4 hours). From the pass, travel by vehicle to the town of Kazanlûk in Bulgaria's "Valley of the Roses" renowned for the production of rose attar (rose extract). In Kazanlûk visit the replica of the decorated Kazanlûk Thracian Tomb (a UNESCO-designated World

Heritage Site). Following the visit, continue to the city of Plovdiv, set on the banks of the Maritsa River in the heart of the Thracian Plain. Spend the next three evenings in Plovdiv.

**May 7, 2010 (Friday)**

**Overnight in Plovdiv**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Tour the principal sights of Plovdiv including its old quarter, full of magnificent Bulgarian National Revival style houses including the lovely Hindlian House built by Armenian merchants. Here, too, is a Roman amphitheater built in the second century AD when the Romans made Plovdiv (then called *Trimontium*) a provincial capital. After lunch, you're free to explore Plovdiv at your leisure. We'll gather again for dinner in the evening.

**May 8, 2010 (Saturday)**

**Overnight in Plovdiv**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Travel by vehicle into the Rodopi Mountains to the 14th century Gornovodenski Monastery (consecrated to Sts. Kirik and Yulita) perched on a ridge overlooking the town of Assenovgrad. From here a two hour walk leads you to the *Assenova Krepost* ("Asen's Fortress") dramatically perched above the entrance to the Chepelarska gorge. The fortress gained prominence as a border fortification in the 13th century under the rule of Bulgarian tsar Ivan Asen II. Later, travel the short distance to the 11th century Bachkovo Monastery (the second largest Bulgarian monastery) featuring the monastery church with its "miracle icon of the Virgin," the medieval refectory, and the ossuary with the oldest murals in the country including a Georgian-style madonna and child. From the monastery, a two-hour round trip hike takes you to up a forested valley to the picturesque Bachkovo spring and an interesting collection of rock chapels which along with Bachkovo Monastery are part of the Kluviata pilgrimage site. Return to Plovdiv for the evening.

**May 9, 2010 (Sunday)**

**Overnight in Yagodina**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Depart Plovdiv by vehicle and head south into the Rodopi Mountains bound for Shiroka Lâka, a picturesque town of slate-roofed houses and humpbacked bridges. After a short walking tour of the village, enjoy a four-hour walk in the bucolic landscapes around the mountain village of Gela before traveling by vehicle to a comfortable small hotel in the highland village of Yagodina.

**May 10, 2010 (Monday)**

**Overnight in Yagodina**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

From Yagodina, a hike of two and a half hours will take you across a mountain plateau to the village of Trigrad. En route you'll enjoy views over the Buinov and Trigrad Gorges for which this area is well-known. Enjoy lunch at a family guesthouse in Trigrad. After lunch, visit the Devil's Throat (*Dyavolsko Gûrlo*), a large cave into which the Trigrad River disappears. Return for the evening to Yagodina village.

**May 11, 2010 (Tuesday)**

**Overnight in Kovachevitsa**

**Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

After breakfast, travel by vehicle into the Buinov Gorge to visit the Yagodina Cave, one of the most impressive in the Rodopi Mountains. Here, you'll find stalactites and stalagmites along with

flowstones and cave pearls. Then, set off on a two hour hike to Zmeitsa village with its small but picturesque Roman bridge spanning the Sarnena stream. A vehicle transfer will then take you to an open mountain plateau near the village of Osikovo. From here, weather permitting, you'll enjoy a stunning view of the Pirin Mountain Range rising in snow-capped splendor across the valley of the Mesta River. Follow a mountain path as it gently descends into the Kanina River Gorge. Your destination is the well-preserved and picturesque Rodopi Mountain village of Kovachevitsa, protected in an architectural reserve and one of the most architecturally "authentic" villages left in the Rodopi Mountains. After about 1.5 to 2 hours of hiking, you'll arrive at the door of a lovingly managed traditional *kashta* ("inn") where you'll spend the next two evenings. (Your luggage will be transported here by vehicle.)

### **May 12, 2010 (Wednesday)**

#### **Overnight in Kovachevitsa**

##### **Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Follow old cobbled lanes that lead from Kovachevitsa village into the surrounding fields and up into the forest-clad mountains. One of these paths leads to the tiny and isolated St. George Chapel crowning a wooded ridge above Kovachevitsa. This hike will take from two to four hours depending on the specific route taken. Return to Kovachevitsa village. The rest of the day is at your leisure—enjoy a leisurely stroll along the quiet, cobbled streets of the village, or kick back and soak up the peaceful ambience of this place! You'll enjoy a second evening enveloped by the tranquility of this singular mountain village!

### **May 13, 2010 (Thursday)**

#### **Overnight in Melnik**

##### **Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Depart Kovachevitsa this morning and travel by vehicle across the Mesta River. A serpentine road then twists its way to the meadows of Popovo Livadi at the crest of the Pirin Mountains before descending the range's southwestern flanks to the small village of Zlatolist at the southern edge of the sandstone "hoodoos" of the Melnik badlands. A 1.5 hour hike from Zlatolist will bring you to the exquisite Rozhen Monastery. Sit under an ancient grape vine and absorb the special ambience and tranquility of this place. The monastery's principal church boasts a magnificent wood-carved iconostasis and a notable Judgment Day mural. From Rozhen Monastery, travel by vehicle to the picturesque town of Melnik at the heart of a wine-producing region. Or, if you prefer, you can walk through the curious sandstone pyramids of the Melnik "badlands" to arrive at Melnik in about 1.5 hours. In Melnik, visit the 18th century Kordopulova Kashta house museum, one of Melnik's most spectacular examples of the Bulgarian National Revival architectural style. Wander through the wine cellars that tunnel through the sandstone beneath the house, and enjoy a tasting of the local wine.

### **May 14, 2010 (Friday)**

#### **Overnight in Sofia**

##### **Breakfast, lunch & dinner included**

Travel northward from Melnik to the Rila Monastery nestled in a deep valley on the western flanks of the Rila Mountains. Portions of the monastery, which was inscribed on the World Heritage list in 1983, date to the 14th century though a large portion of the monastery was reconstructed in the 19th century after a devastating fire. The monastery's five-domed *Sveta Borgoroditsa* church dates from 1834 and is dedicated to the Birth of the Virgin; the walls and domed ceilings of its external gallery are graced with brilliant frescoes that will take your breath away! You can wander through the impressive 19th century monastery kitchen and beneath the multi-storied, arcaded verandas that ring the interior of the monastery compound. Hike to the chapel of St. John of Rila set in lush, deciduous woods on the slopes

of the valley. From the chapel, the path descends easily through flowering meadows and woodlands passing the chapel of St. Luke en route. Continue by vehicle back to Sofia. Cap off your Bulgaria adventure with your fellow travelers at a farewell dinner in a traditional restaurant in Sofia.

**May 15, 2010 (Saturday)**

**Breakfast included**

Transfer to Sofia Airport for your departure flight.

## **Other Details about this Trip**

**Trip Price: \$3,988** per person in a shared room

**Single Room: \$275** additional

### **Trip Price includes:**

- 14 nights accommodation in hotels and small inns in double rooms with private bath, except for one night at an inn with shared bath.
- All meals (breakfast, lunch and dinner) from dinner on May 1 through breakfast on May 15
- Two local professionals: one English-speaking mountain guide and one driver
- All local transportation including airport transfers and bus transportation as described in the itinerary
- Museum admission to all sites described in the itinerary;
- Specially-arranged folklore/dance performance in Melnik during dinner;
- Bottled mineral water throughout the trip (one large 1.5 liter bottle per day per person).

### **Trip Price excludes:**

- International airfare
- Personal insurance and trip cancellation insurance
- All items of a personal nature such as passport fees, drinks, laundry, telephone and internet access.
- Gratuities for guides.
- Baggage handling or excess baggage charges.

**If you would like to sign up for this trip, or if you need more information, please contact us by phone at 1-888-743-0723 or by email at [info@mountainhikingholidays.com](mailto:info@mountainhikingholidays.com).**