



Bulgaria the cradle of European civilization

For different reasons, the fact that this country has an overwhelmingly rich history has paled into insignificance. So we shall offer you an enticing glimpse of this inexhaustible well of European culture.

Although the country was named after its founders – the Ancient Bulgarians /Proto-Bulgarians/, life and culture have flourished on the territory of present Bulgaria since 6000 BC. Legend has it that this region was ‘the centre of the world’ in prehistoric times, the Noah’s Arc was built and anchored here, that it was from Apollonia Beach /present day Sozpol, Bulgaria/ on the Black Sea coast that Jason started on his famous quest for the Golden Fleece. Is it all legend, though? Or perhaps there is a grain of truth in all that? This packed historical holiday will take you further towards the answers to these questions.

This tour lets you bask in the culture of Bulgaria – a small but beautiful country with an emerging market economy where ancient kingdoms once held power in this fascinating part of the Balkan Peninsula, where there is something for everyone – busy modern towns and resorts in keeping with all Western developments, historical sites a visit to which is like a journey back in time, and places of unspoiled and absolutely breath-taking natural beauty.

/You will go on this breath-taking tour in a luxury Mercedes Vito./



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On Day 1 you arrive at Sofia Airport on a Bulgaria Air flight in the afternoon.



St. Sofia monument – Protector of the city

After you check in the **Arena di Serdica Hotel** / <http://www.sofiarooms.com/hotels-sofia-arena-di-serdica.htm/>, you have time to go for a walk round Sofia and admire a couple of Early Christian churches in the centre of Sofia, which date back to the 4th century AD. You have dinner and may even go to a concert, if you wish. Sofia, the capital of Bulgaria, situated at the foot of Vitosha Mountain, where modern buildings contrast with beautiful nineteenth century architecture and lively markets, which are a photographer's delight and source of fine souvenirs. Although in many ways Sofia has become similar to most other European capitals, we cannot ignore it. So before embarking on our truly historical tour, after breakfast (early-risers may even go to attend a service at the Alexander Nevski Cathedral),



Alexander Nevski Cathedral

we shall go to Boyana where you will visit the History Museum, where you can see the latest incredible finds of Bulgarian archeologists dating back centuries before Christ. Of particular interest is the Hall of the Thracian treasures. After the History Museum, you will visit the Boyana Church, protected by UNESCO. Driving through the city, you will get an overall idea of the history of the capital and the country.



Frescos inside the Boyana Church



St. George Rotunda – 4th century AC

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Lunch at 1 p.m. at one of the excellent restaurants in the capital.

On Day 2, after you have caught a glimpse of our dynamically developing capital, we drive north-east across Sredna Gora and into the Balkan Mountains /Stara Planina Mountains/. Our first stop is in Etara - an ethnographic architectural reserve, a museum, spread on 7 hectares of land and comprising 50 exhibits – technical water facilities and tools, houses with craftsman’s shops, and buildings and facilities of social significance. When you arrive in Etara, you feel as if your coach had really taken you back to the late 18th, early 19th century, to this Revival centre of 26 crafts whose products were successfully marketed in Bucharest, Vienna, Marseille, the Ottoman Empire, and elsewhere.



A traditional house in Etara reserve with the famous stone roof

Etara creates a vivid idea of the typical Bulgarian craftsmen’s village of 150 years ago. The narrow cobbled streets, the stone fountains and the muffled roar of water-mills, the gas-lamps, the clock-tower, the old houses, the 25 functioning craftsman’s workshops reproduce the spirit of the Bulgarian Revival in an unforgettable way.

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Bozhentsi

A traditional house in

Then you head for the place where you will spend your second night in Bulgaria, one of the most peaceful and beautiful villages in the bosom of the mountain – the village of Bozhentsi. This village, set up in the 14th century is also an architectural reserve which has entirely preserved the Spirit and atmosphere of the Bulgarian National Revival. It is one of those places where Time gets tangled in its own feet and lies down like an old hound to savour the beauty of the moment. It is a perfect setting for our first traditional Bulgarian dinner which will give you the opportunity not only to feel the unique hospitable atmosphere of the place but also to sample delicious Bulgarian cuisine. A walk round the village after dinner is a must!

You spend the night at Hadji Velinov's Inn [/www.sturs.net/loc/64/боженци/](http://www.sturs.net/loc/64/боженци/) – an old house turned into a charming boutique hotel offering both the peaceful atmosphere of timelessness and all modern conveniences.

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On Day 3, we leave Bozhentsi for a drive to Veliko Tarnovo – the old capital of Bulgaria



View to Veliko Tarnovo from the Yantra River

/the old capital of the second Bulgarian Kingdom/ /from 1175 to 1393/. On the way we stop at the Sokolovski Monastery where, in the bosom of the mountain, we have lunch.

After a short but scenic drive, you arrive at Veliko Tarnovo. The town lies on three hills, and between the 12th and the 14th century became the strongest Bulgarian fortification of the Middle Ages. You can still feel the presence and spirit of the Bulgarian kings and generals of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom – Asen and Petar, and their younger brother Kaloyan (‘Handsome Ivan’) who stopped the invasion of the papal crusaders, shattered their dreams of a Latin Empire, and kept their Emperor Baldwin hostage in a tower in Tsarevets till the end of his life. Here, in the Church of the 40 Martyrs lie the bones of several Bulgarian kings, as well as the three columns of the Bulgarian system of state. You will visit two of the monasteries with the most interesting history where you will learn about the Bulgarian Literary Schools, about the Bulgarian saints, etc. The best time to visit the well-preserved ruins of the Palace of Veliko Tarnovo is late in the afternoon so that in the evening you could watch the ‘sound and light’ show there, which is absolutely fantastic. After a day full of impressions, you are in for a really deserved rest.

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Fortress of
Tsarevets

You spend the night in 'The Wine Palace' /www.vinpalas.hit.bg/ a luxury hotel in Arbanassi, another village – architectural museum reserve. In this village everything is authentic: the unique architecture of the houses, the old-time narrow streets, the drinking fountains, the mural paintings, icons and iconostases in its remarkable churches and monasteries. Nowadays, however, Arbanassi elegantly combines its preserved old-time atmosphere with modern servicing.

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On Day 4 after breakfast, you will have the chance to walk around Arbanassi and admire its splendid houses and churches. Shall we pay a visit to one of the most famous and intriguing Bulgarian artists – Gancho Karabadzhaikov? Yes? Then we shall have coffee at his place in Arbanassi and meet the man himself.



A typical painting by G. Karabadzhaikov using Bulgarian colors made famous used by the French artist Matisse

After that we continue our tour of the Old Bulgarian Capitals in low-lying Dobrudzha – the granary of Bulgaria, where Bulgarian warriors used to gallop in the 7th century when the Bulgarian state was founded with its capitals and symbols. We stop at Preslav first. It was initially founded and functioned as a Slavic settlement until its fortification at the beginning of the 9th century. But the development of the town enjoyed its apogee after Simeon the Great /**King Simeon I The Great** – a monarch, ruler of Bulgaria from 893 to 927 during the first Bulgarian Kingdom. He fought a series of successful wars on Byzantines, Serbs, Hungarians and Croatians, making Bulgaria the most powerful state in Eastern Europe. His reign was also a period of remarkable cultural prosperity, later called the Golden Era of Bulgarian culture./ decided to move the capital of the state to Preslav in 893, turning it into a centre not only of Bulgarian politics and diplomacy but also of culture, literature and fine arts. A chronicler mentioned that it took Simeon 28 years to build this new capital. Archeological excavations have,

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however, proved that the city continued to develop and reached the peak in its growth and magnificence in the middle of the rule of Tsar Peter I of Bulgaria.

In view of the impressive town-planning, the vital economy and the grandeur of buildings like the Round Church */supposed to be church of the Templars/* and the Royal Palace, Preslav was a true rival to the largest and most important city centres in the western hemisphere. Culturally, it was the centre of the Preslav Literary School. The city also had large ceramic workshops which produced art ceramics, glazed tiles, as well as ceramic icons and iconostases.



Veliki Preslav

And while you are still under the impressions of Preslav, we continue our tour, stopping at the famous Madara Horseman. It is a rock relief cut at a height of 23 m on the almost vertical Madara Rocks on the western slope of the Madara plateau. This is the most significant early medieval monument of Bulgarian art, the only one of its kind in Europe. It is also included in the list of UNESCO-protected world cultural and natural heritage list. The relief is a composition of a horseman with a shepherd's crook, a dog running after the horseman, a snake and a lion. According to the latest approach to deciphering the monument, the places of the horseman, the dog and the lion (the earthly counterparts of the sun, the moon and the Leo constellation with its main star Regulus) corresponds to the year 165 (the year of the Snake). This, according to the 'List of Names of Bulgarian Khans', a valuable written monument of the 8th

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century, had been the first year of Bulgarian statehood in Europe. This comes to prove yet again that the ancient Bulgarians were a highly civilized people forming a state. In addition, words fail to express the magic that this place conveys.



The stunning and unique Madara Horseman

From the Madara Horseman we continue our tour back in time to Pliska the first capital of Bulgaria. Pliska was the capital of Bulgaria from 681 to 893 AD. Founded by Khan Asparukh, it spread over an area of 23 square kilometers and was surrounded by a moat and earthwork ramparts. The walls of the inner fortress were 2.6 meters thick and about 12 meters high. Khan Omurtag brought in artisans and craftsmen to improve the city. In 886, Boris I founded the Pliska Literary School. When you walk around the ruins of this early medieval city, it is easy to imagine its past grandeur.

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The columns of Pliska

Your coach takes you further east to the modern sea capital of Bulgaria – Varna – the biggest Bulgarian port.

Ancient as the sea and new as the sunrise, Varna stands out against a background of sea and sky that meet and mingle in a vast expanse of blue. It was born 26 centuries ago, when sea-farers from the town of Miletus came to the lands of the Thracian tribe of Crobisi and after long struggles found their colony named Odessos, circa 580 B.C. The Ionic civilization was not the first to leave traces of an advanced material culture on the high coast. Excavations of the Varna necropolises have revealed monuments of older civilizations, which can vie in antiquity and splendour with the Sumerian civilization.



Varna gold treasure

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After the establishment of the Eastern Roman Empire, the city became a busy trade center. In 536 Emperor Justinian I declared Odessos the centre of an administrative region covering a large territory. Construction continued in the city. Remnants from Christian basilicas have survived from that time to this day in the vicinity of Varna.

In the late 6th and early 7th century compact Slav masses settled in the Balkan Peninsula. The ethnic character of the coastal region changed. The Slavs gave the city the name of Varna.

The location of the city is spectacular. Green hills and forests stretch to the very beaches of this modern town. The city itself is an intriguing blend of modern and sophisticated developments and wide, tree-lined promenades. Luxury hotels rub shoulders with modest guest houses. You have lunch in a cozy restaurant in the Marine Park and afterwards you can relax at [your hotel 'The Azalia' /www.azaliahotel.com/](#).

Day 5 is dedicated to sightseeing in Varna. You will admire the oldest gold treasure in Europe, exhibited in two of the halls of the Archeology Museum, which is a rare and memorable opportunity. You will also visit the Bulgarian rock monastery and the cathedral in Varna. We shall also go to Balchik to feel the atmosphere of the place where the great Romanian Queen Ekaterina, related to Queen Victoria, pined with love and sorrow. And if you are exhausted after this sightseeing tour, the staff of the spa centre at The Azalia will help you relax.

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On Day 6 you leave Varna for a drive along the beautiful Black Sea coast, past Sunny Beach and Nessebar, south to Sozopol. An early Christian church in Nessebar



You have fish-lunch in Nessebar thus having the opportunity to walk around this pearl on the Bulgarian Black Sea Coast. The town has its origins from an ancient Thracian

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fishing village called Menabria (meaning Mena's town; Mena being the founder of the settlement). In the 6th century BC it became a colony of Greek settlers from Byzantium and Calchedon. It remained the only Dorian colony along the whole Black Sea coast. /The **Dorians** or **Dorian Greeks** (Greek: Δωριεῖς, *Dōrieis*, singular Δωριεὺς, *Dōrieus*) were one of the principal ancient Greek tribes, the other three being the Achaeans, the Ionians and the Aeolians. They were distinguished by the Doric Greek language, society and historical tradition/.

The Greeks called it Mesambria, and the town grew into a big and well-fortified city-state having natural protection from the sea and on land. The city had its water-mains and drainage system, an amphitheatre and numerous cult buildings, the most impressive of which was the Temple of Apollo. The polis grew into an important trade centre, with a substantial flow of goods from the whole Aegean and Mediterranean Regions. Archeological findings evidence active trade with the whole of the Old World.

The city maintained excellent relations with the neighbouring Thracian tribes and minted its own coins as early as the 5th century BC. In the next two centuries it grew so much that it set up its own colony – Navlohos, near Obzor. The whole area between what are now Nessebar and Obzor was a granary which provided bread not only enough to feed the two colonies but also to be bartered and exported.

In the early Middle Ages the fortified walls of the town were rebuilt. It reached its greatest prosperity during the reign of Tzar Ivan Aleksandar, when it spread across a great area outside the walls of the city, even beyond the peninsula. Around that time, most of the churches in Nessebar were built. Most of them have survived through the ages and add to the unique charm of the town. According to world statistics, Nessebar is the town with the greatest number of churches per capita in the world /according to worldwide statistics/.

Today, Nessebar is an enchanting blend of ancient and modern, of transient and eternal. Charming old houses exist in harmony with luxury new developments, enticing folk restaurants and tavernas attract as many tourists as do classy modern discos and night clubs.

From Nessebar, you drive south to the classic sea-side town of Sozopol. Located 34 kilometres south of Bourgas on a scenic rocky peninsula, this fishing village/tourist resort/art colony is arguably the most charming place on the Black Sea coast and one of Bulgaria's crown jewels.

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Sozopol traditional houses

Founded in 610 B.C. by Ionian Greeks from Miletus and named Apollonia in honor of their most adored god, this was the first coastal Greek colony to be established. It was a thriving and important place, trading with parent Miletus, Athens, and the Isle of Rhodes. The Apollonians acted as middlemen between the Greek world and the indigenous Thracians from whom they acquired copper, honey, grain, and wood in exchange for wine, salt, and textiles. Legend has it that it was from here that Jason sailed on his quest for the Golden Fleece.

The colony reached its zenith during the 5th century B.C., which coincided with the height of power of the Thracian Odrisae tribe, many of whom gradually came to achieve rank and status in the Greek state.

The name Sozopol first appears as an inscription on a 4th-century Roman column, probably in connection with the patron Apollo as many ancient Greek towns called Apollonia later changed their names to Sozopolis (City of Salvation) when they accepted Christianity.

When Sozopol was incorporated into the First Bulgarian Kingdom in 812 under Khan Krum it developed into a large and wealthy town. Sozopol was one of the last holdouts to Ottoman domination, falling in 1453.

The National Revival period saw the building of typical Black Sea houses; ground floors of stone generally used for storage supported overhanging upper stories of wood, with protruding bay windows and sheltered eaves. Clustered along the narrow peninsula's cobblestone streets and alleys, some 45 houses are classified as cultural monuments.

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Sozopol's housing architecture from the National Revival period closely resembles that of Nessebur. It falls into the category of the so-called "Black Sea house" featuring stone-walled basements, wooden staircases leading up to the living quarters, a wooden scaffolding, jutting eaves, and exterior wood paneling to protect the buildings from the salty sea air.

Everything in Sozopol today is sunny, bright and attractive - starting with the cobblestone lanes and old houses with strings of fish hanging from the roof, and ending the southern drawl of the fishermen who fondly call their white boats "ships". The Apollonia Festival of the Arts, held here every September gathers painters and actors, singers and musicians, poets and dancers to a ten-day world of art come alive amidst the old houses of this southern small town.

Remains of the fortress wall and a necropolis have been preserved. One of the most interesting archaeological finds is Anaxander's tombstone kept at the Archaeological Museum in Sofia. *Anaxander was king of Sparta (ruled c. 640-615 BC)*. So it is no accident that you spend two action-packed days in this vibrant town, at 'The Fjord' Hotel [/www.hotel-fjord.com/](http://www.hotel-fjord.com/). There are plenty of activities to choose from – from sunbathing, swimming and all kinds of water sports to a safari in the area. Not to mention a tour of the area – a boat trip along the Ropotamo River, a trip to The Thracian megalith Beglik Tash, the Bulgarian Stonehenge */see photograph below. The place is believed to have been built in the 14th century BC. The stones are 16 in number, with a diameter of 2-2.5 m each, positioned in the directions of the world. There is a throne and a step cut into a landing, directed north-south. Similar steps cut into the stone can be seen in Stonehenge./*and Sinemorets, and to the Strandzha Mountain



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Thracian tomb in Strandzha

where you can soak up its legends and admire the dances on live embers.



Veleka River

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On Day 8, you leave Sozopol for a journey through the Valley of the Thracian Kings. This is a region of Thracian burial mounds found in the valley of Kazanlak. Apart from the famous Kazanlak Tomb



Frescos in **Kazanlak Thracian tomb**



and the tombs at the villages of Kran, Maglizh, the Koprinka Dam and many others /we shall not reveal too much in advance so as not to spoil your experience of

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seeing for yourselves/, the archeological excavations in the region brought to light new sites under the mounds, unique monuments showing the development of Thracian culture and architecture between the 5th and the 4th century BC.

New sensational discoveries were made in the summer of 2004 – a unique gold mask (second half of the 5th century BC) weighing 690 grams was unearthed in a mound close to Shipka. The same team of archeologists brought to light one of the oldest Thracian Temples (first half of the 5th century BC) known in the world to date, and a bronze head of a man was unearthed, ritually buried outside the temple. An impressive treasure was also found, including 74 items, 20 of which gold.

And after this tour in the land of the Thracian Kings, you arrive in Plovdiv – a fitting end of this part of your historical tour.

You spend the night at The Hebros Hotel [/www.hebros-hotel.com/](http://www.hebros-hotel.com/). – a small boutique hotel at the foot of the Old Town.



Houses in Old Town of Plovdiv

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The Plovdiv amphitheater

And on Day 9, the tour of the Old Town and the area of Plovdiv will be unforgettable.

Remains of ancient, mediaeval, revival and modern culture coexist and are interwoven into the unobtrusive, irresistible and eternal beauty of this city. They do not stand in each other's way; they complement and enrich each other to make Plovdiv a synonym of Bulgarian history and a genuine world city.

Plovdiv is very, very old. The Eternal City, as Rome is conventionally called, is much younger. Athens, Carthage and Constantinople came into being later. A contemporary of Troy and having survived Mycenae, Plovdiv is one of the oldest cities in Europe, a city upon layers of cities and an epoch upon layers of epochs. Plovdiv is all in one: a Thracian and classical Greek polis, the pride of Philip of Macedon, the capital of Thrace under the Roman Empire, a centre of Byzantinism, a stronghold of the Bulgarians, a dream of the crusaders - a magnificent, wealthy and most important city.

Kendros, Eumolpia, Philippopolis, Pulpudeva, Thrimonzium, Pulden, Populdin, Ploudin, Filibe -- those were the ancient names of Plovdiv throughout its 8000 to 12 000 years of existence. The name Plovdiv first appeared in 15th century documents and has remained till today.

In the distant past Plovdiv was situated on seven hills: Taxim, Nebet, Jambaz, Sahat, Jendem and Bunarjik. The seventh hill, Markovo Tepe, has nowadays subsided completely under the pavement of modern Plovdiv.

In 432 B.C. the town was conquered by Philip II of Macedonia. During his rule the ancient Thracian fortress and towers were rebuilt. The vain Philip II gave the city his own name, Philippopolis. Soon it became a Thracian town again, called Pulpudeva.

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During the 1st century A.C. it was conquered by the Romans. The practical Romans called the town Thrimonzium (lying on three hills) because the Roman town was situated on three hills, Taxim, Nebet, and Jambaz Tepe. The Roman emperors Trajanus and Marcus Aurelius built solid fortresses around the town. They introduced many improvements, as well as coin minting. At the time Plovdiv was known as Ulpia Thrimonzium, the most flourishing metropolis of the Thracian province. Plovdiv had the most modern for that time water-mains and drainage; the huge stadium, the amphitheatre, the baths, and above all – the Roman pretorium – the residence of the Governor, where the Emperor also stayed when he visited the city, added to its splendour. Some of these landmarks have been skillfully restored and used even today. The amphitheatre, for instance, is a marvelous setting for theatre, ballet and opera performances.

Another symbol of Plovdiv is the Old Town – with winding cobbled streets and beautiful Revival houses – magnificent examples of 18th and 19th century architecture. There are numerous museums and galleries worth visiting, and the charming restaurants lure you to enter and sample unique Bulgarian cuisine and wines.

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On Day 10, the tour continues south-east to Perperikon.

"...When Octavian, father of Augustus /*The future Roman emperor Augustus was born into an equestrian family on 23 September 63 BC. His father, Gaius Octavius, was the first in the family to become a senator*/, at the head of his army, came upon the Holy Mount of Dionysus, he consulted the oracle about his son, and the prophets said to him that his son **was to rule the world**, for as the wine was spilt onto the altar, the smoke rose up above the top of the shrine and even unto heavens, **as had happened when Alexander the Great himself had sacrificed upon that same altar**".

Gaius Suetonius Tranquillus.



A sight of Perperikon

Thousands of years ago, Perperikon was a massive bald rock. Such rocks drew prehistoric humans like a magnet and became an object of worship. The rugged wilderness of the Eastern Rhodope must have cradled a rich megalithic culture long before the Thracian tribes inherited the land. The early inhabitants worshiped the huge undressed stones for their natural splendour. Later generations learned to carve and smooth the rocks and used them for shelter and protection.

As their tools became more effective, humans could shape or remove larger areas of the rock surface but that also meant that they obliterated the vestiges of earlier cultures. The earliest traces of human civilisation discovered so far at Perperikon were

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dated to the late Neolithic Period, 6th-5th millennium BC. At that time, humans had not yet learned to work the face of the rock massif: fragments of Neolithic pottery were found deposited in the natural crevices of the cliff. However, Perperikon was not yet a settled village but a rock of worship. Next came the Eneolithic Period (or the Copper Age). Pits hewn in the rock and fragments of pottery found in them were dated to the late 5th - early 4th millennium B.C. The pottery is similar to that found at other Eneolithic villages, such as the famous Mound of Karanovo. What had gradually become an inhabited rock complex continued to develop during the Bronze Age. There is every reason to believe that during the late Bronze Age in particular, 18th-12th century BC, Perperikon saw its first heyday, which probably coincided with the peak of the Mycenaean and the Minoan civilisations.

Notably, the abundance of pottery from that period was found in archaeological strata lying on large areas of finished rock surface. While subsequent carving destroyed most of that cultural layer, it has supplied sufficient evidence to archaeologists to suggest that by the end of the Bronze Age Perperikon had become a major place of worship. Very interesting late Bronze Age pottery was found at Perperikon. One almost fully preserved vessel features an incised lime-filled composition of six human figures around a representation of the Sun. The composition is organised like a floral motif, with the limbs of the humans being depicted as leaves, and their heads, as suns.

These must be ancient deities whose names we may never learn. A system of religious beliefs did not emerge until the early Iron Age, 11th-6th century BC, a period represented as well by the pottery found at Perperikon. Unlike the ancient Greek mythology, however, which developed at the same time, Orphism, the Thracian system of religious and philosophical beliefs is virtually unknown. Dionysus and Orpheus undoubtedly stemmed from that tradition.

For more than a century already, archaeologists have searched for the remains of the famous temple where Dionysus had an oracle. It is believed that, when made, the discovery will be as important as that of Troy and Mycenae. Very little is known about the temple today and the only thing which is known for sure is that it was in the Holy Rhodope mountains.

The ancient Greek historian Herodotus is the main source of information about the temple of Dionysus. In his famous History, Herodotus gives an account of the march of Xerxes' immense army on Greece in 480 BC. As the huge invasion force was slowly making its way along the Aegean coast, many Thracian tribes sent envoys to pledge their allegiance to Xerxes. Only the Satrians, who inhabited the Rhodope, chose to ignore him: "The Satrians however never yet became obedient to any man, so far as we know, but they remain up to my time still free, alone of all the Thracians. [...] These are they who possess the Oracle of Dionysus; which Oracle is on their most

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lofty mountains. Of the Satrians those who act as prophets of the temple are the Bessians." Indeed, the Satrians went down in later historical accounts as Bessians.

Herodotus never himself travelled across Thrace and the geographical references in his account are often vague. He placed the Temple of Dionysus on the 'most lofty mountains' held by the Satrians, which were 'covered with forest of all kinds and with snow'. This led scholars to believe that the Temple was located in the high western part of the Rhodope range. Few had thought of the fact that only the highest ridge of the southern Rhodope can be seen from the Aegean coast. Beyond it, are the low, habitable middle and eastern ranges of the mountain which abound in archaeological remains from various ages. Among them, the holy city of Perperikon, the biggest megalith in Europe, is both a geographical and a historical landmark. Naturally, there were many temples of Dionysus as he was a chief god in ancient Thrace. Aristotle speaks of another major temple in the southeast of the Balkans inhabited by the Bisaltians, another Thracian tribe. In his *Hecuba*, Euripides is quite puzzled: "[...] some say that the Oracle of Dionysus is in Pangaea [the Rhodope] and others say it is in Hemus." According to later Roman historians, however, the temple in the Rhodope was a principal one.

According to latest historical research, the boundary between the Odrysae and the Bessians */Thracian kingdoms/* lay in the eastern Rhodope range, east of present-day Kurdzhali. And this is exactly where the holy city of Perperikon is located! Moreover, Dion Cassius suggests that the Temple of Dionysus was on the border between the two Thracian Kingdoms. Recent archaeological finds tend to confirm the hypothesis that the Temple was indeed at Perperikon.

Here we have simply raised the veil of this place a little to let you have a glimpse of what is in store for you there.

After a day to remember, you continue your journey through the bosom of the Rhodopes to Stoikite, where you stay at the 'Inna' Hotel – a charming boutique hotel in the heart of the Rhodopes [/www.bghotelite.com/villa-inna.928.bg/](http://www.bghotelite.com/villa-inna.928.bg/).

Stoikite is a quiet resort suitable both for summer and for winter tourism, with breathtaking scenery, ideal for hiking in summer, and skiing in winter. It offers accommodation and restaurants to meet the needs of every tourist.



Kukeri-festival in Shiroka Laka

Kukers /mummers/ also called **babugers**, are Bulgarian carnival figures – men disguised as beasts or typical characters /Grandma, Grandpa, the King and the tax-collector/. By old custom, in the period between the second and the first Sundays before Lent, they dance in the streets to drive the evil spirits away, and to bring fertility and health.

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On Day 11, after spending the night in Stoikite, you continue your journey of exploring the cultural heritage of the Rhodopes through Shiroka Laka, where you will have an memorable 'folk lunch', to the Gorge of Trigrad. At an altitude of 1450 meters, 7 km long, this awe-inspiring place is famous for its caves and archeological sites of cave dwellings and Thracian necropolises.

Enticing open-air restaurants serve delicious trout and other traditional Bulgarian dishes.

You will feel that even a day is not enough for such an enchanting place as the Gorge of Trigrad.



The Devil's throat in Trigrad



The Yagodina Cave

And the cozy atmosphere at **the Yagodina Hotel** [/www.yagodina-bg.com/index.htm](http://www.yagodina-bg.com/index.htm), as well as the delicious dishes served in the restaurant of the hotel, adds to the delight the whole experience brings.

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On Day 12, you continue along the valley of the Mesta River, a region with old and fascinating history, to the town of Bansko – the best-known Bulgarian resort these days, located at the foot of the Pirin Mountains.

Over 2000 years ago the Thracians named the enchanting Pirin Mountains Orbelus (the Snow Mountains). The high mountains shelter, among many others, crystal water lakes and snow peaks (the National Park of Pirin is included in the list of the Convention on Preservation of Natural and Cultural Heritage), over 230 invigorating mineral water springs, some 100 peaks located at an altitude of over 2 000 m above sea level, 186 alpine springs, cultural and historical monuments and offers unique hospitality and cordial reception attracting visitors from all over the world.

Bansko (population: 10 000 people) is an administrative, economic and cultural centre. Located in the southeastern part of the Valley of Razlog, the town is famous as a centre of tourism visited by nature friends, ski sports fans and admirers of the Bulgarian cuisine and customs in all seasons. It enjoys the status of a unique complex of international importance to economic tourism.

Bansko is the place of birth of a number of famous national leaders and revolutionaries such as Paisii Hilendarski – author of Slav-Bulgarian History, Neofit Rilski – founder of the world Bulgarian education and first Bulgarian encyclopedist, Toma Vishanov – founder of the Arts School of Bansko and Nikola Vaptsarov – a world famous Bulgarian poet.

The spirit of the past can be felt due to the unique atmosphere created by the two churches, the Convent of the Monastery of Rila and the national revival buildings having preserved their original architecture of fortified house style typical for Bansko.

Walking in Bansko is a unique experience – over 150 cultural monuments, 5 of them of national importance: Uspenie Bogorodichno Tomb Church dating back to the second half of 18th century, Sveta Troitsa Church dating back to 1835 and decorated with original wood-carving iconostasis, the Clock Bell Tower dating back to 1850, Benina House and the house of birth of Nikola Vaptsarov. The folklore, national customs and holidays provide the best picture of the traditional spiritual culture of Bansko and enrich your visit with pleasant emotions.

Nowadays, Bansko witnesses many new, luxury developments, and can, without undue modesty, boast of the best facilities for skiing, as well as of the best golf courses in Bulgaria.

So the last two days will be spent there, at ‘**The Lion Hotel**’ /www.hotelslion.com/ of course – a memorable finale of your historical tour of Bulgaria.

CROWN

Developments

On Day 13, we leave Bansko after breakfast to return to Sofia, stopping at the Rila Monastery on the way.



The Rila Monastery

You spend your last night in Bulgaria at the Arena di Serdica Hotel /<http://www.sofiarooms.com/hotels-sofia-arena-di-serdica.htm/> to board an early flight back to London.

We are convinced that on leaving Bulgaria you will feel relaxed, and at the same time enriched with knowledge, impressions and memories, which leave you wanting to come back sooner rather than later and bring your friend along!