

**TASTE OF BULGARIA TOUR**

12 – 19 SEPTEMBER (Tour Code: TOB) Price: £1,450

(Based on a group of 6 or more, a smaller group will incur a supplement)

**EARLY BOOKING DISCOUNT: £50 PER PERSON IF BOOKED BY 30TH SEPTEMBER 2019**



Our gourmet tour takes place during the most exciting time of the year for farmers and winemakers – the harvest, or vintage.



Balkania Travel



Bulgarian wine came to prominence in the UK in the mid 1980s, but its cuisine still remains one of its best-kept secrets. Local Bulgarian, Slavic and Central European traditions are influenced by the cuisines of its Mediterranean neighbours in a finger-licking Balkan mix.

Some of the national dishes include beans in soups or stews, charcoal grilled kebapcheta (rissoles), banitsa (cheese pastry), stuffed peppers and pickled cabbage leaves and dry cured salamis. Lyutenitsa, a spicy home-made relish of peppers, eggplant and tomatoes is a particular favourite. Seasonal desserts use ripe fruit, e.g. figs, quince, roast pumpkin with honey and walnuts. Bulgarians believe they were the first to start souring their milk. Kiselо mlyako (yoghurt) is synonymous with the country, made with the indigenous *Lactobacillus bulgaricus*. The delicious Bulgarian white cheese Sirene, a prized product in the foodhalls of Harrods in the 1980s, is a main ingredient of the Shopska salad, one of the most popular starters on the Bulgarian table, to go with aperitifs, such as Rakiya and the aniseed Mastika. Meals are lengthy affairs. Entertaining guests is one of the passions of the Bulgarians.

Bulgarian wine has centuries old traditions, dating back to the mysterious first local inhabitants, the Thracians, many centuries BC. During the last 20 years the Bulgarian wine industry has made enormous strides away from the familiar mass-market wines produced under the state monopoly. Huge investments have been poured into young vineyards and new technology is being implemented by many independent wine makers. Our tour takes place at the most exciting time in the vine-growers' year. Be among the first to witness the sea-change in Bulgaria's wine-making.

Bulgaria's beautiful scenery, friendly people and historic sites complement the excellent wine and food. The B-BS offers you the benefits of over forty years' experience of organizing tours to Bulgaria. Our tour price includes a donation to Bulgarian charitable organizations. For your financial protection our tour operators for over twenty years, Balkania Travel Ltd. are licensed by the UK Civil Aviation Authority, ATOL 4465 and bonded by the International Air Transport Association, IATA number 91-2 7839.

## **Outline Programme**

*(which may be subject to minor adjustments).*

### **Saturday 12 September**

Scheduled flight from Heathrow to Sofia to be greeted by your genial host and guide Mrs Yordanka (Dani) Kotseva. Drive south through the Struma Valley then towards the majestic Rila Mountains to visit Rila Monastery at an altitude of 1,150m, a major symbol of Bulgaria's Eastern Orthodox Christianity, founded in the 10th century, home today to some 50 monks. Continue to the small spa town of Sandanski, not far from the border with Greece. Check into Hotel Villa Sintica, the town's newest pearl named after the ancient Thracian tribe of Sinti. Created with the idea of combining the area's long tradition in wine-making with the plentiful mineral water springs, it is the brainchild of three local friends, agronomists Ivan, Petar and Sotir. Presentation of the spa and winery complex amenities at your disposal to indulge in for your first taste of Bulgaria.

### **Sunday 13 September**

Sandanski is famed for having the highest average annual temperature in Bulgaria. This, and its abundance of mineral springs, has made it a favourite health and wellness resort since Roman times. Appreciated also by Todor Zhivkov, the country's last communist ruler, who had a palatial residence built there, now locally notorious as its ambition was somewhat wasted and he could never host to impress any of his foreign guests there, as the place did not have air-conditioning. On to Rupite, an extinct volcano where hot springs make the ground steam even on hot days. This is where Baba Vanga, the famous clairvoyant spent most of her life and was buried in the small chapel decorated with wall paintings by a top Bulgarian artist, controversially placing her image on a par with Christ. Continue to Melnik the smallest town in Bulgaria, huddled on both sides of the usually dry stream beneath the bare cliffs of eroded sandstone which embrace it. Visit the museum of wine. Continue to Villa Melnik winery called 'The White Swallow of Struma' and walk its awesome underground tunnels for maturing its wine. Return to the relaxing spa of Villa Sintica, before dinner and overnight there.

## Monday 14 September

Today we drive via the premier ski resort of Bansko for a short sightseeing tour and a chance to get to the top of the magnificent Pirin mountain by lift for some unsurpassed views or take a ride in the country's narrow-gauge Rodopi railway. Late afternoon we reach the village of Dobursko, nestling at an altitude of 1,070m. between the three majestic mountain ranges, Rila, Pirin and Rodopi. Only 170 kms away from the modern capital you find yourself in a bygone era. After checking into your hotel for two nights, you are welcomed warmly at your dinner with local specialities and entertainment by the Doburski Babi ensemble.

## Tuesday 15 September

After your Bulgarian breakfast we go on a walking tour of the village. There may be a chance to witness the festivities for the start of the school year. Visit the tiny church of St. Teodor Tiron and Teodor Stratilat, built in 1614. See the mural depicting Christ ascending to heaven as if in a rocket, an image unique in the world. Continue the tour and pop into a village house to find out about the locals' lifestyle and be treated to some home made delicacies. Return to the hotel and join (if you wish) a Bulgarian cookery lesson, preparing for yourselves some of the dishes for your dinner. Overnight Dobursko.

## Wednesday 16 September

After breakfast we bid farewell to Dobursko to cross the Rodopi mountains towards the fertile Thracian Plain. Coffee stop in Velingrad, Rodopi's spa capital. Continue down the mountain to the village of Vetren Dol, where we visit a local's house. Bulgarians have a strong countryside living tradition and many city folks keep a country house, where they spend long weekends tending gardens, orchards and vineyards, gathering harvests and making winter preserves from their own crops. After a hearty welcome and home-made treats, continue to Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second city which has a 7,000-year history and was Europe's Capital of Culture in 2019. After checking in for 2 nights we take a stroll along the pedestrian street "dvizhenie" (like the Italian Corso) to the Old Town, a cultural reserve of the Bulgarian National Revival Period (18 -19 C.). Visit the world famous Roman Theatre as well. Dinner at one of the many local restaurants with a specially selected tasting menu, demonstrating Plovdiv's excellence in its famed Thracian cuisine. First of two overnights in Plovdiv.

## Thursday 17 September

After breakfast, a day outing takes us first to the Assenova Krepost, the remains of an 11th century fortress marking the frontier between Bulgaria and Byzantium. Continue up the Rhodopis to Bachkovo Monastery, noted for its unique combination of Byzantine, Georgian and Bulgarian culture, united by common faith. It was founded in 1083 and survived the 5 centuries of Ottoman rule. There are galleried domestic buildings, a lovely refectory and internal and external frescoes to admire. A local riverside restaurant with its mountain trout specialities is our choice for lunch. Return to the Thracian Plain and visit the famous Todoroff winery, set up and run by the artistic Todoroff family. Some of their wines have been frequent samples on the tasting tables of Vinopolis, London. Tour of the boutique winery and a tasting in its beautiful reception room decorated with original paintings by Bulgarian artists, commissioned for use on their wine labels. Hear the old story of Mavrud, a legendary hero, also the name of the noble indigenous vine variety of Mavrud. Return to Plovdiv. Your Guide will advise you about your choice of restaurants for your independent dinner.

## Friday 18 September

After breakfast, transfer to Sofia, check-in at your luxury hotel. Walking tour of the centre of Sofia's central "Largo" around the excavated ruins of the 4th Century Roman city of Serdika. Emperor Constantine favoured the city for its mineral baths and considered for a time making it the capital of his Eastern Empire. Visit to the magnificent gold-domed Patriarchal church Alexander Nevski. Farewell dinner with folk show.

## Saturday 19 September

Leisurely departure to Sofia Airport for your early afternoon return flight to Heathrow.

# BULGARIA 2020

## OUR PRICE INCLUDES:

- Return scheduled flights from Heathrow to Sofia with all taxes and charges. Regional airport departure may be available at a supplement. Do enquire.
- 7 nights accommodation, on a twin bedded shared occupancy basis.
- Half board, local home made treats, three winery visits with-tasting, one Bulgarian Cuisine cookery course.
- Coach for transfers and excursions with professional driver, lift/narrow gauge railway ride.
- English speaking guide.
- All museum entrance fees.

## NOT INCLUDED:

- Lunches or light suppers, where not included (about £4-5).
- Travel Insurance (Compulsory). Balkania Travel can advise.
- Drinks (other than tastings) and other personal expenses such as gratuities.
- Single room supplement £150.

Published July 2019



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