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Europe Trip, Visiting the Balkans (E19A-2)

Bulgaria – Sofia and Day Trips

In 2019, I took a trip to Europe. My focus was on some of the countries in the Balkans, book-ended with stays in London. My primary targets in the Balkans included Romania and Bulgaria, with day trips out of Sofia, Bulgaria that took me into Serbia and North Macedonia.

I began my visit to Bulgaria using a private driver for the trip from Bucharest to Sofia, making a couple sightseeing stops along the way. I used Sofia as my base in Bulgaria, but took three day trips and made a suburban excursion while I was there.

Bulgaria is located along the route that early man followed from Africa into Europe, and includes the oldest continuously occupied city in Europe (Plovdiv; Sofia is second oldest by some measures). The earliest culture, the Neolithic Karanovo culture, was established in present-day Bulgaria almost 9,000 years ago. Thracians, Persians, Celts and Macedonians took their turns until the Romans conquered the area in the 1st century AD. In the late 7th century, Bulgars invaded and established the First Bulgarian Empire. This makes Bulgarian the oldest culture in Europe using the same name.

The empire lasted almost 400 years, until the Byzantines conquered it. A Bulgarian revolt led to the Second Bulgarian Empire, but 200 years later the Ottomans took over and ruled Bulgaria for the next 500 years. Bulgaria regained its independence only in the 1870s.

A apparent desire to regain some of its earlier empire territories motivated Bulgaria to side with the Germans in both World Wars, which didn't work out so well for Bulgaria. The Soviet Union forced Communism on the country after WWII, and kept Bulgaria behind the Iron Curtain until the Communists were ousted in 1989. Bulgaria has aligned with Western Europe since then.

So why visit Bulgaria beyond the historical interest? As a kid growing up surrounded by Iowa's cornfields, I often found myself reading about the histories and cultures of other places, especially those countries that weren't the focus of what they taught us in school. These places seemed so exotic and – in the case of countries behind the Iron Curtain at the time – somewhat mysterious. I've had a list of countries that I've long been curious about, including Bulgaria.

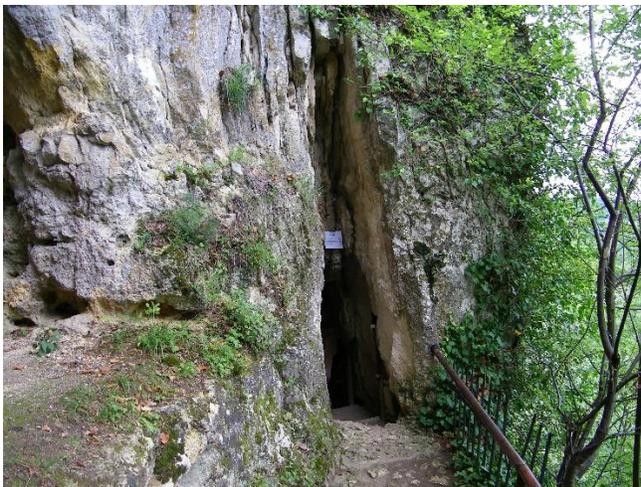


The mysterious, exotic landscape of Bulgaria



To get from Bucharest, Romania to Sofia, Bulgaria I hired a private driver. Train service between the two cities was terrible, and I found only one direct flight/day. And the driver actually cost less than the flight. The company I went with also had a set of hour-long sightseeing options you could add to the trip for only about \$25 apiece. I added two stops.

Near Ivanovo, we stopped at the Ruse River Nature Park – the river canyon shown here.



The park is home to a UNESCO World Heritage Site, the Rock-hewn Churches of Ivanovo. In the 12th century, monks carved churches, chapels, living quarters and other rooms into the canyon walls, as many as 300 rooms in all. In the 14th century, frescos featuring Bulgarian Christian medieval art were added to some of these, and represented a stylistic revolution in such art.

My stop at Ivanovo included a hike up the canyon wall to the Holy Virgin Church, the entrance of which is shown here.



Views of some of the surviving frescos on the walls (left) and ceiling (below) of the church.





My second stop was in the city of Veliko Tarnovo to see the Architectural and Museum Reserve Tsaravets, the partially restored ruins of a massive fortress complex high above the Yantra River.

From the 12th to the 14th centuries AD, it was the primary fortress for the Second Bulgarian Empire, and was home to the royal and church palaces until the Ottomans conquered the area in 1393.

This is the main gate leading into the fortress complex. On top of the hill in the center of the fortress is a 1981 reconstruction of the Patriarchal Cathedral of the Holy Ascension of God. It is built on top of a late Roman Christian basilica.



More of the hilltop fortifications



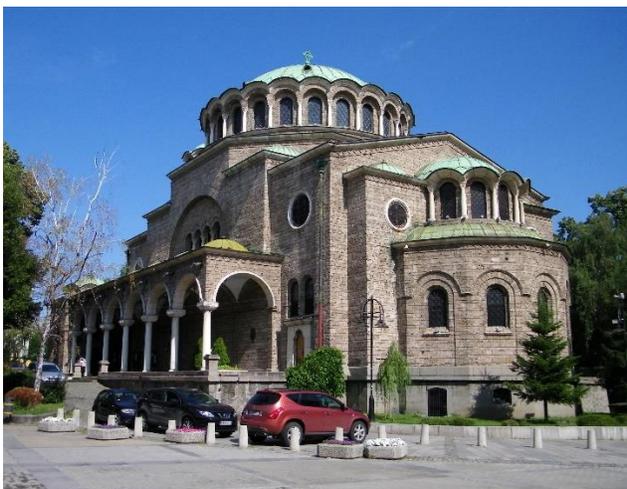
There were related fortifications and other ruins sites on other nearby hilltops along the Yantra River.



Statue of St. Sofia, the city's namesake, located in the center of Sofia.



My hotel was located across from the statue of St. Sofia at the north end of Vitosha Blvd., now a pedestrian mall lined with restaurants and shops. In the distance is Mt. Vitosha.



Near my hotel was St. Kyriaki Church a.k.a. St. Nedelya Church. In 1925, Communists bombed the church in an assassination attempt against the king. He was late that day and thus was unhurt, but more than 150 others were killed.



Sofia was originally named Serdica after early settlers, the Celtic Serdi tribe. Around 29 BC, Serdica was conquered by the Romans, and it became a decidedly Roman city.

In the 1990s during excavations in the city center for constructing a new subway station, they uncovered the long-buried Serdica, and began an on-going archaeological investigation. Much of Serdica lies under modern buildings, and progress dictated that the subway station be built, but several sections of the ruins of Serdica are now accessible to the public, including these central Serdica ruins.



The east gate of the walled city of Serdica has been incorporated into the subway station/underground pedestrian tunnels.



Outdated Google Satellite images showed this as a parking lot in front of my hotel. Now more archaeological excavations of Serdica are underway here.



The west gate of the walled city of Serdica. A modern church has been built over part of this ruins site.



The 4th century Amphitheatre of Serdica was discovered in 2004 during construction for a new hotel. An exposed and restored portion of the amphitheatre is accessible to tourists on the ground floor of the hotel.



The building that housed my hotel and the home and offices of the president of Bulgaria wraps around St. George Rotunda Church and some additional Serdica ruins. St. George was built by the Romans in the 4th century, and it is the oldest surviving building in Sofia. The interior features a number of murals, some dating back to the 10th century. This view is from my hotel room. The Bulgarian president and I waved our good mornings across the courtyard from our windows every day. At least I think it was him.



The Church of St. Petka of the Saddlers dates back to the Ottoman occupation years.

The building to the right includes my hotel and the president's residence and offices. The white building with columns center-left used to house the Bulgarian Communist Party's offices.



Inside the Church of St. Petka. Some of its murals date back to the 14th century.



Just to the northwest of the city center is the Ladies Bazaar. The blocks long market features several shops and open-air stalls, and it is especially popular with the locals.



The Sofia Synagogue is the largest surviving synagogue in southeast Europe, but one of only two left in Bulgaria. The synagogue is also home to the Jewish Museum of History, although the museum was closed while I was in town.

Bulgaria sided with Nazi Germany in WWII, and at the start of the war it enacted discrimination policies against the Jews. Although Bulgaria transferred non-Bulgarian Jews from occupied lands to Germany, it did not deport any Bulgarian Jews. During the Communist years after the war, most Bulgarian Jews migrated to Israel.



Hot springs in the center of Sofia supported thermal baths. The baths may be no more, but the hot mineral water from the springs is freely available to anyone with a bottle or jug who wants to take some home from these fountains.



This building used to house the Sofia Public Mineral Baths. Today it is a decent museum focused on Sofia and regional history.



As I headed out on my exploration of the areas to the east of the city center, I stopped to watch the changing of the guards for a bit. The guards usually have to be changed once or twice during their 12-hour shifts.



The National Archaeological Museum has an impressive collection of artifacts from across Bulgaria, many like this one dating back several centuries before Roman times. The museum is located in what was the oldest and largest Ottoman-era mosque in Sofia.



A royal palace for the Bulgarian king was built in the 1880s shortly after Bulgaria gained its independence from the Ottomans. Today it houses the National Art Gallery, which I skipped, and the National Ethnographic Museum, which I toured. It is more focused on historical Bulgarian culture.



The St. Sofia Church is the second oldest church in Sofia (St. George Rotunda is older), dating back to the 4th-6th centuries, although it was built on top of earlier churches. It was built east of the walls of Serdica, which was later renamed Sredets by the Bulgars. In the 14th century, Sredets was renamed Sofia after this church.

The Ottomans converted it to a mosque in the 16th century, destroying its 12th century frescoes in the process. The mosque was abandoned after two earthquakes. The building was restored as a Christian church in the early 1900s. It is believed to be the oldest currently functioning church in Europe.



Excavations underneath the church revealed walls and foundations of earlier churches that had been built at the site along with tombs from an ancient Roman necropolis. The ruins and tombs beneath the church, including this painted tomb, can now be visited as part of a museum.



The Memorial to the Unknown Soldier is located along the side of St. Sofia Church



The Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, the cathedral church of the Patriarch of Bulgaria. Built in the Neo-Byzantine style, it's only about 100 years old. Although several tourism information sources make a point of highlighting it as a major tourist attraction, and it looks impressive on the outside, the interior is somewhat underwhelming, and it just doesn't have the history that nearby St. Sofia Church has. The crypt beneath the church has been converted into a Christian art museum.



Home to the National Assembly of the Republic of Bulgaria

Note the yellow brick road. I knew I wasn't in Kansas, but the city center which is paved with yellow bricks doesn't look anything like Oz, either. According to one of my day trip guides, the locals aren't too fond of them as they're especially slippery when wet.



Monument to the Soviet Army, in Knyazheska Park. Not popular with the locals, its sculptures are often targeted with decorations or vandalism (a Google image search is worth checking out).

Here and elsewhere in eastern Europe, I've heard that the Soviets extracted some pledges to maintain the Soviet memorials as Communism fell because of the Soviet's role in defeating the Nazis. But this gets debated today, not unlike the debates in the U.S. regarding Confederate monuments in the South.



I spent a couple hours on a nice Sunday afternoon exploring Knyaz Borisova Park, a large city park to the southeast of the city center. It was a chance to people-watch every day Bulgarians.

Not surprisingly, Bulgarians enjoy spending their time in the park much like Americans do.

Like sitting on a park bench playing the accordion



Engaging in a vigorous match of badminton



Taking the family out for a spin in a rented pedal car

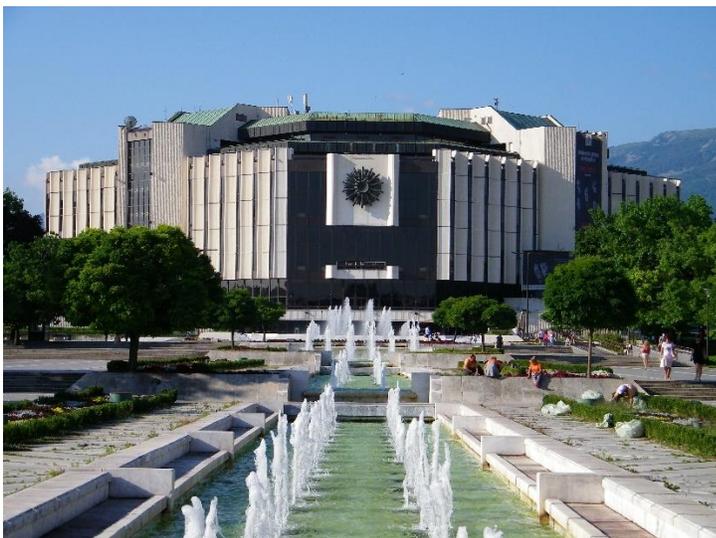


And what better way to refresh yourself on a warm summer day in the park than corn. You could get a cup of buttered corn kernels, or a whole boiled or grilled ear of corn at any of a number of these small corn stands.

Most of these stands usually also offered other treats. Homemade potato chips at this one, fresh doughnuts at another nearby one. While I was sitting on a bench near the latter one drinking a Diet Coke, I saw that everyone who approached that stand skipped the doughnuts and got corn. Even the teens, so you know that corn is cool.



A rose garden in the park. Bulgaria is the world's largest exporter by far of rose oil. It takes more than 3000 pounds of rose petals to extract just 16 ounces of rose oil. Rose petal harvesting is done by hand.



The National Palace of Culture is a large conference, convention, art exhibition and performing arts center



Temple of the Bulgarian Martyrs, which includes this wall of the names of Bulgarians who died at the hands of the Communists



Sculpture in front of the Bulgarian Socialist Party National Council Offices



I studied Russian in college, and was actually inducted into Dobro Slovo, The National Slavic Honor Society for it. But I haven't had much practice putting my Cyrillic reading skills to use in the years (cough, decades) since then. So as my driver and I entered Bulgaria en route to Sofia, I practiced reading the signs we passed, shaking off my Cyrillic cobwebs.

When I walked around Sofia, I didn't have many problems figuring out what was what, in spite of the language differences. Based on my interpretation of the signs, this store for example sells kitchen appliances.

Just kidding. Obviously, it's an auto supply store.



For my suburban excursion, I took a taxi six miles out into the foothills of Mt. Vitoshka to visit Boyana Church, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. The oldest parts of the church are about 1000 years old, but it is especially famous for its layers of outstanding frescoes, many dating to the 1200s. The frescoes represent one of the best-preserved sets of eastern European medieval religious art. Preservation measures including controlling the internal temperature, limiting visitor groups to no more than 8 people at a time for no more than 10 minutes, and no photography – check out its frescoes online.



The outside of the church is also interesting. Brick combined with stones scavenged from the ruins of Serdica, some with Roman inscriptions on them. The three curved arches towards the right represent the crucifixion of Jesus Christ and the two thieves. The arch representing Jesus has a symbolic window that brings light into the church.

Just over a mile into my walk back to the city center I stopped at this large building (center). It once served as the primary residence of Todor Zhivkov, the last Communist dictator of Bulgaria. It now houses the National History Museum of Bulgaria.



The museum's collection includes well over half a million artifacts spanning the history, archaeology, arts and ethnography of the lands that are now Bulgaria. To the left is its 17th century The Last Judgement (Doomsday) mural, a theme common in Byzantine church art.

The collection is impressive, although I think it could have done a better job of telling Bulgaria's story. And the lack of anything of substance about the Communist era and beyond was a significant gap.



On my last full day in Bulgaria I took a day trip that covered Plovdiv and the Rila Monastery.

Evidence suggests that Plovdiv has been inhabited since about 6000 BC, making it the oldest city in Europe and one of the oldest in the world. It was known as Philippopolis after Philip II of Macedon conquered it in the 4th century BC. It became part of the Roman Empire in 46 AD.

There are a number of ruins sites, mostly from the Roman era, scattered around the city center. This is the north end of the Roman Stadium. It was built in the early 2nd century. The stadium was almost 800 feet long and could seat 30,000 people. However, most of the stadium now lies under the buildings and streets of Plovdiv's city center.



The Dzumaja Mosque was originally built in the 1300s on the site of the St. Petka Tarnovska Cathedral Church after the Ottomans conquered Plovdiv. The current structure mostly dates to the 15th century.



The Kapana District became a neighborhood of craftsmen 500 years ago during the Ottoman occupation. After fading in recent decades, it has been revitalized and is now an arts district – or more specifically “a district dedicated to the creative industries”.



The Plovdiv Old Town area is known for its Bulgarian Renaissance architecture, but Roman ruins can be found here, too. The base of the stone walls shown here were originally part of the Roman city defensive walls. Above them are medieval enhancements to the city walls. And above that are additional walls to support the buildings.



The Church of St. Constantine and St. Helena dates back to 337 AD, although the current building only dates to 1832. The wall is characteristic of churches built during Ottoman times. The Ottomans barely tolerated Christian churches and often demanded that they be hidden from view.



The Roman Theatre is one of the best-preserved Roman theatres in the world. It was built in the late 1st century, and could seat as many as 7,000 people. It was discovered after a 1970s landslide. It was restored and in places reconstructed. Supplemented with modern lighting and other features, the theatre is in use today.



Nebet Tepe is one of the seven hills of Plovdiv. It is here that archaeological evidence suggests that the hill and surrounding area were settled about 6000 years ago and continuously occupied since then, making what is now Plovdiv the oldest city in Europe. Ruins from several different cultures have been found on the hill as it was built, rebuilt and fortified across the millennia. Tradition holds that the Apostle Paul once walked through a tunnel that was found under the north wall.



My final destination was the Rila Monastery, another UNESCO World Heritage Site. The monastery was founded in the 10th century. Here is the main church and part of the residential structure that surrounds the church.



The church (above) and some of its exterior frescoes.



The monastery played a critical role in preserving Bulgarian culture and identity during the centuries of Ottoman occupation, and it played an important role in Bulgarian national revival. It did this while influencing the development of the culture and arts of all Christian nations that were occupied by the Ottomans.

Bulgaria's King Boris III is buried inside the church.



Posters for the Get Down Hip Hop Dance School. With 2 locations in Sofia. Many people tell me that hip hop originated in Bulgaria.



I know that I like to grab dinner at the local car wash. Turns out that Bulgarians share my passion.



Bulgarian is similar to Russian, and both languages generally use the Cyrillic alphabet, with a few differences. And yet it was not unusual to see business signs and ads that used both the Cyrillic and Roman alphabets. And many used English, or a combination of Bulgarian and English.

This obviously is the sign for McDonalds, written in lower case Cyrillic except for the capital M at the start. Note the extra “a”. Bulgarian seems to do a better job of spelling things like they sound than English does.



The sign for the Kinky Shop (Магазини), a convenience store-like chain of kiosks, mixes the alphabets.



Of course, if you’re really looking for something kinky, you might shop at the all-English sexwellshop. But that may just be a pipedream®.



Boris says, “Brushing your teeth is a great way to work on your abs.” I suspect Boris brushes his teeth at least twice a day.



Just seeing the sign advertising the Disney movie “Tsar Lion” probably makes you want to sing a few bars of “можеш ли да усетиш любовта довечера”



Because even fish need pampering....



Much of the political graffiti I saw was anti-communist and anti-fascist, often written over a hammer & sickle that someone had painted earlier.



The Selfie of Liberty (my name for it) street art



Departing Sofia for London. The Balkan Peninsula is named for the Balkan Mountains, shown here. The range extends from northwest Bulgaria to the country's Black Sea coast.