

Black Sea Coast



For most foreign package-tourists, the Black Sea coast is Bulgaria, and the big, purpose-built resorts here are becoming serious rivals to Spain and Greece in attracting international holidaymakers. Many, of course, simply fly in, splash about and fly out again without seeing anything beyond the parasols and jet skis, but independent travellers will find plenty of places to explore, including empty beaches to the south and north, the bird-filled Burgas Lakes, beautiful ancient towns such as Nesebâr and Sozopol and one of Bulgaria's most attractive cities, the unofficial regional capital of Varna. Those with their own transport will have even greater choice, with the wild Strandzha Nature Park in the south and the picturesque Kaliakra Cape and Dobrudzha region in the north theirs to discover.

More so than any other region of Bulgaria, however, the Black Sea coast has been heavily targeted by property developers in the last few years, and almost everywhere you look, construction work on massive hotels, apartment complexes and holiday homes is ongoing, scarring what were once pristine, open stretches of sand and putting pressure on local wildlife. Environmental campaigners have voiced their concerns about the pace and scale of the development, but as long as the money flows in, the building goes on.

Climate

In summer, the climate is warm and mild, so it's obviously the best – and the busiest – time to visit. The average temperature is a warm 23°C, but sea breezes keep it cool. During winter the temperature rarely drops below freezing, but at least once a season a storm (or three) howls in from the Black Sea and buries the coast in snow.

Media

Programata (www.programata.bg) Free weekly listings magazine, in Bulgarian only, covering bars, clubs, restaurants, cinemas and museums in Varna, Burgas and other coastal towns. Widely available in venues up and down the coast. The website is also available in English.

Summer Seaside Guide Also published by Programata, but in English and Bulgarian, this free glossy annual summertime guide carries reviews of restaurants and bars along the coast.

Sunny Times (www.sunnytimes.info) Free monthly English newspaper, aimed mainly at British expats, with a mix of local and UK news. You can pick it up at some hotel reception desks in Varna, Burgas and the big resorts.

History

Evidence of Bronze Age and Thracian settlements have been found in the area, while Greek colonists from Apollonia (modern-day Sozopol) expanded their territory into the Burgas region as far back as the 6th century BC. Later, the Romans came along and Emperor Vespasian founded a city here, named Deultum, in the 1st century AD. The name Burgas first appeared on maps in the 17th century, when fisher folk from the wider region settled here. The city grew quickly after the completion of the railway from Plovdiv (1890) and the development of the port (1903). Today it's a major industrial and commercial centre, home to the largest oil refinery in the Balkans.

Orientation

Burgas is pleasingly compact, so almost everything of interest is within walking distance. The train station and the main Yug bus station are both located just south of the main pedestrian thoroughfare, ul Aleksandrovska, which runs northwards, via pl Troikata, to bul San Stefano. About halfway along ul Aleksandrovska, another pedestrian street, bul Aleko Bogoridi, heads eastwards towards Maritime Park.

SOUTHERN COAST

BURGAS БУРГАС

☎ 056 / pop 226,000

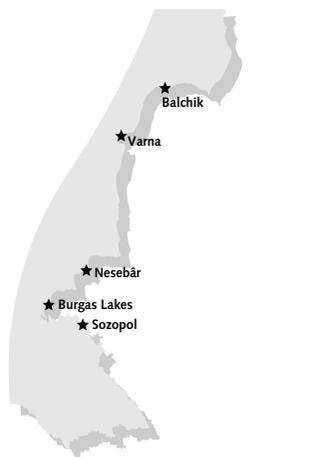
The gateway to some of the Black Sea coast's best beach resorts and most historic towns, Burgas (sometimes written as 'Bourgas') rarely features on the tourist itinerary in its own right. It's often compared unfavourably with the more cosmopolitan Varna, but as well as being an important industrial centre and transport hub, Burgas is a lively, unpretentious university city that makes a good base for exploring the southern coast, while its uncrowded beach, bosky seaside park and clutch of museums can happily fill a few days of anyone's time.

Burgas is at its best in summer, when the pedestrianised centre is alive with crowds of meandering, ice-cream-licking locals making their way towards the Maritime Park and the seafont, but the city's bars, clubs and theatres give it an active life beyond the transient sunny days enjoyed by the neighbouring tourist resorts.

Nature lovers also come to Burgas for the four lakes just outside the city, which are havens for abundant bird life (see p220).

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Sacred sights**
Sense the centuries of devotion among Nesebâr's gorgeous churches (p231)
- **Beach party**
Join the locals for cocktails and clubbing on Varna's pounding seaside promenade (p242)
- **Sun, sea & sand**
Go beach-hopping between Sozopol's two sandy bays (p223)
- **Back to nature**
Meet some new feathered friends at Burgas Lakes (p220)
- **Flowered up**
Inhale the fragrant sea air at the botanical gardens in Balchik (p252)



MAPS

The *Burgas* map (1:12,000), published by Datamap, which also includes smaller maps of Sozopol, Nesebâr and Sunny Beach (Slânchev Bryag), is perhaps the most useful, but is in Cyrillic only. Domino's *Burgas* map (1:8500) is also published only in Cyrillic. Both maps are available at city bookshops and street stalls.

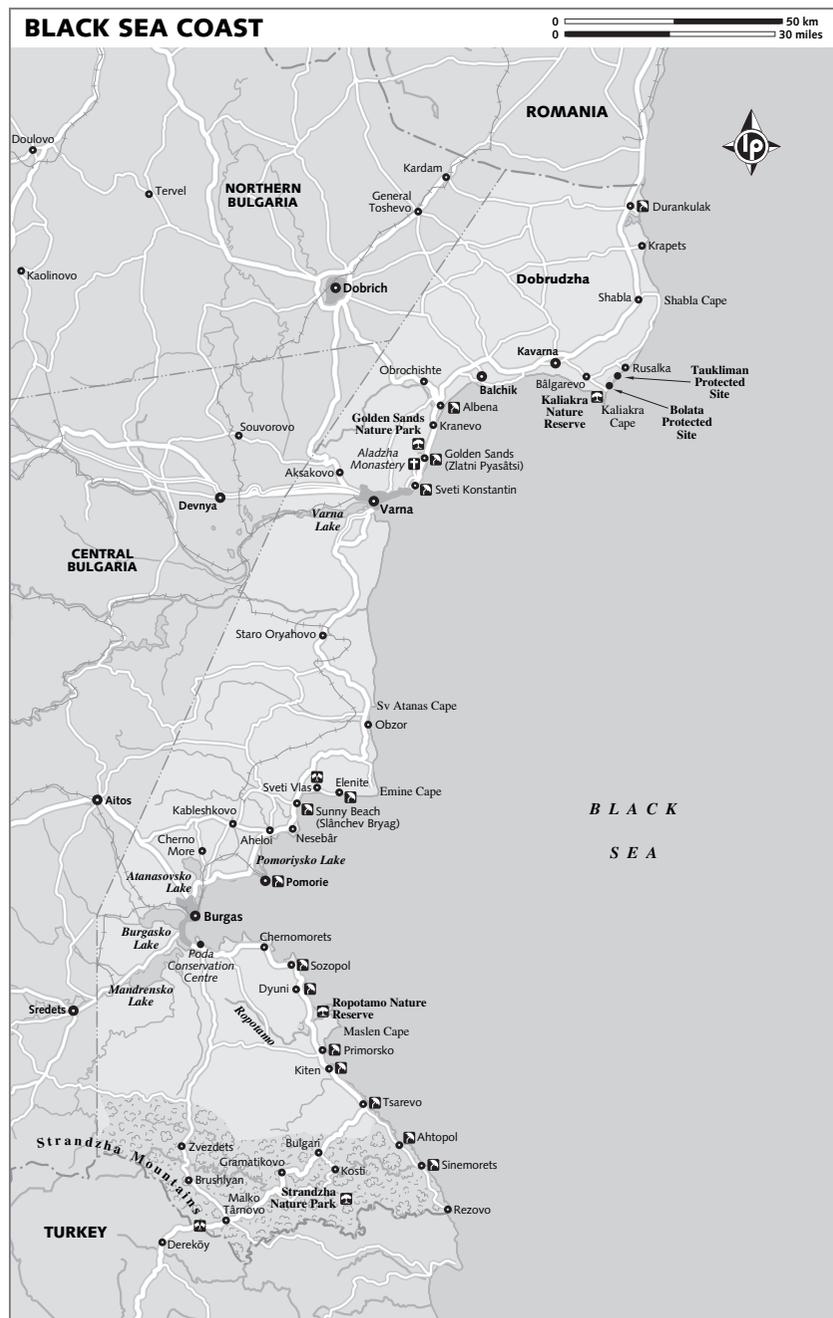
Information

BOOKSHOPS

Bel Canto Bookshop (ul Knyaz Al Battenberg) Small shop by the train station offering a variety of books as well as maps and postcards.

Helikon Bookshop (☎ 800 231; pl Troikata 4; ☎ 9am-1.30pm & 2-8.30pm) On the edge of the main square, this bookshop stocks a wide range of books, including English-language novels, and local, regional and international maps.

Penguin Bookshop (☎ 830 460; ul Aleksandrovska 147) At the northern end of this road, on the corner with bul San Stefano, Penguin sells a small selection of English-language novels and books about Bulgaria.



INTERNET ACCESS

Internet Club (cnr bul Aleko Bogoridi & ul Slavyanska; ☎ 24hr; 2 lv per hr) This subterranean outlet is the most central place to check your emails.

MEDIA

Burgas City Info Guide (www.cityinfoguide.net) Free, glossy quarterly guide published in English and German, with information on local hotels, restaurants and clubs, as well as background information on the city and surrounds. Copies are available at the tourist information centre and some hotel receptions.

MONEY

Numerous foreign exchange offices can be found along ul Aleksandrovska and ul Aleko Bogoridi. **Unicredit Bulbank** (ul Aleksandrovska) has an ATM that accepts all major credit cards. Banks that change cash and travellers cheques and have ATMs are **Central Cooperative Bank** (ul Aleksandrovska) and **Raffaisen Bank** (ul Ferdinandova).

POST

Post office (ul Tsar Petar 2)

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Blue Sky Travel Agency (☎ 840 809; bluesky@infotel.bg; Hotel Plaza, bul Aleko Bogoridi 42) Helpful agency that can book domestic and international air tickets and arrange tours.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Burgas Museums (www.burgasmuseums.net) Website offering information on museums in and around Burgas.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 825 772; ul Aprilov; ☎ 9am–6.30pm Mon–Fri) Modern office with helpful, English-speaking staff, at the entrance to the underpass below ul Hristo Botev. It has plenty of brochures and leaflets on Burgas and the wider region.

Sights

STS CYRIL & METHODIUS CHURCH

The city's main church (ul Vúzhrazhdane; ☎ 8am–5pm) is an imposing, late-19th-century edifice, with an especially fine, intricately carved iconostasis, colourful, recently renovated murals and elaborately decorated grey marble columns. Tourists are welcome, but don't be dressed for the beach if you visit as it's still the city's chief place of worship.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Burgas' small **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 843 541; ul Aleko Bogoridi 21; adult/under 7yr 2 lv/free;

LIFE'S A BEACH

Every day during summer, lifeguards work between 8am and 6pm at the resorts and popular beaches; they usually rescue a few tourists who ignore the warnings and don't swim between the flags. It is extremely important to pay attention to these warnings on the Black Sea – there are often very strong currents at play and there are several fatalities every year.

Topless bathing is acceptable at the major resorts, but less so elsewhere.

Top Five Beaches For...

- Water sports: Albena (p249)
- Urban swimming: Varna (p242)
- Safe, shallow water: Primorsko (p225)
- 24-hour fun: Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag; p235)
- A low-key hideaway: Tsarevo (p226)

☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 6pm Sat Jun–mid-Sep, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri mid-Sep–May) houses a collection of local finds ranging from the Stone Age up to the Roman era. Artefacts on show include Neolithic flint tools, a wooden canoe from the 5th century BC, Thracian jewellery and the remarkably well preserved wooden coffin of a Thracian chieftain. A separate room displays recently unearthed discoveries from a Neolithic site and a Roman necropolis outside the city, including pottery, clay idols and silver jewellery.

ETHNOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM

This museum (☎ 844 423; ul Slavyanska 69; adult/child 2/1.20 lv; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Sat, closed Sat mid-Sep–May) houses a collection that includes period furniture, regional costumes and exquisite jewellery, as well as displays covering the local weaving and fishing industries. Everything is labelled in Bulgarian.

NATURAL SCIENCE MUSEUM

The **Natural Science Museum** (☎ 843 239; ul Konstantin Fotinov 20; adult/under 12yr 2/1 lv; ☎ 10am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 6pm Sat Jun–mid-Sep, 9am–5pm Mon–Fri mid-Sep–May) presents a series of old-fashioned – but still informative – displays on local flora, fauna and geology. Exhibits of rocks, seashells, butterflies and beetles occupy the ground floor, while the basement holds mineral samples

HOTEL PRICES

All accommodation prices listed in this chapter (unless stated otherwise) are what you should expect to pay during the high season (July and August). During the shoulder season (May, June, September and October), room prices drop by up to 50%, so along with the continually good weather and greatly reduced crowds, this is the best time to visit.

Hotel Fors (☎ 828 852; www.hotelfors-bg.com; ul Konstantin Fotinov 17; s/d Jun-Sep 54/64 lv, Oct-May 48/58 lv; (P) (S)) Another fair-priced city-centre hotel, with decent-sized rooms that are bland and functional, but perfectly comfortable nonetheless. There's a pizzeria downstairs and a basic breakfast is included in the price.

Hotel Chiplakoff (☎ 829 325; www.chiplakoff.com; ul Ferdinandova 88; s/d incl breakfast €30/35; (P) (S)) A 10-minute walk west of the centre, this friendly, family-run hotel occupies an attractively restored mansion, designed by the same architect who built the city's grand train station. Rooms are large and contemporary in style, and one (No 25) has a big terrace. The original spiral staircases have been retained; there's no lift, however. There's a popular pizza restaurant downstairs.

Hotel Bulair (☎ 846 232; www.hotelbulair.com; ul Bulair 7; r Jul & Aug 65 lv, Sep-Jun 55 lv; (S)) Very handy for the bus and train stations, this 14-room hotel occupies a converted mansion on a busy road. Rooms are neat, if unspectacular, with the usual mod cons including TVs and fridges. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Luxor (☎ 847 670; www.luxor-bs.com; ul Bulair 27; s/d/apt 85/95/125 lv; (S) (S)) A little further on from Hotel Bulair, the Luxor is a vaguely Egyptian-inspired place. Rooms are comfy, fairly standard three-star fare, but the hotel also has a business centre, gym and an Italian restaurant.

TOP END

Hotel Plaza (☎ 846 294; www.plazahotel-bg.com; ul Aleko Bogoridi 42; s/d/apt 99/146/187 lv; (S)) The snazziest place in town and in one of the best locations, the Plaza caters to business travellers, with a modern business centre and conference facilities. Rooms are comfortable, though not quite as showy as the public areas, and there's a trendy on-site restaurant. It's easy to miss

though – the ground-level frontage is occupied by a couple of travel agencies.

Hotel Bulgaria (☎ 842 610; www.bulgaria-hotel.com; ul Aleksandrovska 21; s/d 118/157 lv, renovated 190/212 lv; (S) (S)) Towering 20 storeys over the southern end of the city's main pedestrian drag, this '70s monolith is certainly very convenient and has the best facilities in town, including two restaurants, a gym, pool and business centre. The renovated rooms are OK, but it's fantastically overpriced for what's on offer, and the older rooms don't even have air-con. More realistic rates are offered outside the summer months.

Eating & Drinking

There's a scattering of laid-back cafés in Maritime Park, while other inviting places for a drink or a quick bite can be found along bul Aleko Bogoridi, which also has its share of kiosks selling pizza, kebabs and ice cream. The alfresco bars on the northern end of pl Troikata make an attractive stop for an evening drink, and there are several summer-time bars along the beach.

BMS (ul Aleksandrovska 20; mains 2.50-4 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) Cheap, self-service, cafeteria-style chain offering simple but filling fare such as sausages and stews. There are some outdoor tables and it also serves beer.

New Shanghai (☎ 843 105; bul Aleko Bogoridi 61; mains from 5 lv; ☎ 11am-midnight) At the eastern end of the street, this always bustling, authentic Chinese restaurant serves up huge portions of all the old favourites, including sweet and sour chicken and pork noodles, as well as vegetarian dishes.

Evropa (☎ 828 845; ul Aleksandrovska 59; mains from 6 lv; ☎ 10am-1am) Almost every restaurant in the city seems to serve pizza, but if you're in the mood for a *quattro stagione*, then Evropa is one of the better outlets, baking the freshly made pizzas in a traditional brick oven. Pasta, salads, fish and pork steaks also figure on the menu.

Vodnitsata (☎ 0897988334; Maritime Park; mains from 6 lv; ☎ 10am-2am) Standing on the seafloor overlooking the beach, 'The Water Mill' is a traditional wood-cabin affair, which is always packed out with locals. Specialities include grilled fish, barbecues, steaks and salads, and it seems to be one of the rare places along here that stays open beyond the summer months.

our pick **Pri Lipite** (☎ 828 500; ul Knyaz Al Battenberg 14; mains 7-18 lv; ☎ noon-midnight) Easily the best

restaurant in town, 'Under the Lime Trees' is set in the shady courtyard of a house built in 1910 for the then mayor of Burgas. It offers a huge menu of traditional Bulgarian cuisine including stewed boar, roast lamb, chicken *kavarma* (a traditional seasoned stew served in a clay pot) and veal-tail soup, as well as various yoghurt-based dishes (with all the milk and cheese coming from the restaurant's own dairy). It gets extremely busy at night, and reservations are advisable.

London Pub & Restaurant (ul Tsar Simeon 4a; mains 8-22 lv; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Catering to homesick British expats and visitors, this is a friendly place close to the seafloor, offering all-day English breakfasts (9 lv), as well as mixed grills, steak-and-onion pie, chicken curry and real British tea, no less.

Monte Cristo (☎ 826 006; bul Aleko Bogoridi 60; mains 9-20 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of the classier options along this pizza-prone street, serving up excellent dishes such as duck breast with blueberries, salmon with peppermint sauce, and lobster. It also does some tasty appetizers: try the marinated sheep's cheese with honey and pears.

Barcode Beach Bar (☎ 0877260837; ☎ 24hr) One of the more self-consciously hip and artsy bars on the beach, offering comfy sofas, cocktails and bar snacks. Pricier than most, too.

Entertainment

In summer, nightclubs and bars materialise among the trees of Maritime Park; among the more reliable is **Alibi** (☎ 0897962262; ☎ 11pm-late), with a varied programme including 'retro nights', dance and Latino music. Live music, dance and drama performances often take place at the Summer Theatre, which was being rebuilt at the time of research.

Kino Trakiya (☎ 842 481; ul Tsar Asen I 6; tickets around 3 lv) Shows recent Hollywood films every evening. For something a bit more sophisticated, find out what's on offer at the **Adriana Boudevska Drama Theatre** (☎ 846 040; ul Tsar Asen I 35) or the **Burgas Opera House** (☎ 840 789; ul Sv Kliment Ohridski 2).

Getting There & Away

AIR
Bulgaria Air links **Burgas Airport** (☎ 870 248; www.bourgas-airport.com) with Sofia (around €60/110 one way/return) every day (April through October), departing at 6.20am, and **Austrian Airlines** (www.austrianairlines.bg) flies three times

a week between Burgas and Vienna. In summer, **Wizz Air** (☎ 02-960 3888; www.wizzair.com) connects Burgas with London Luton, Budapest and Warsaw. There are a number of agencies around town, one of the handiest being the Blue Sky Travel Agency (p215).

BUS

Yug bus station (☎ 845 722), at the southern end of ul Aleksandrovska, is where most travellers will arrive or leave. It's just outside the train station and most destination signs are in English.

Buses and minibuses leave every 30 to 40 minutes throughout the day to popular places along the Black Sea coast, including Sozopol (3.50 lv, 40 minutes, every 30 minutes between 6.40am and 9.40pm), Nesebăr (2.50 lv, 40 minutes) and Sunny Beach (Slănchev Bryag; 4 lv, 45 minutes). Buses also go to Primorsko (5 lv, one hour, every 30 minutes between 6am and 7pm) and Kiten (4.60 lv, one hour, every one to 1½ hours between 6am and 8pm), but only four times a day as far as Ahtopol (6 lv, 1½ hours). Minibuses travelling directly to 'Pomorie Central' (Поморие Център; 2 lv, 25 minutes) leave every one to 1½ hours.

Each day, buses travel to Plovdiv (17 lv, four hours, 7.30am and 9.15am), Varna (9 lv, two hours, every 30 to 40 minutes), Stara Zagora (7 lv, 2½ hours, departs 10.30am) and Sliven (6 lv, two hours, about every two hours).

Two of the main intercity bus operators, **Biomet** (☎ 828 440) and **Etap-Grup** (☎ 845 857) have kiosks outside the Hotel Bulgaria. Both run several services to Sofia each day (20 lv, seven to eight hours).

Coaches to Istanbul are frequent and cheap. **NRG Travel** (☎ 844 774) and **Karat-S** (☎ 845 722), both just outside the train station, run between two and five services each day (35 lv, seven hours). **Nişikli Turizm** (☎ 841 261; ul Bulair) has several daily departures (35 to 40 lv). Coaches depart from outside its office.

From the **Zapad bus station** (☎ 20 521; ul Maritsa 2), about 2km northwest of pl Troikata, buses leave for Malko Tărnovo (7 lv, three hours, four or five daily), in the Strandzha Nature Park. Take city bus 4 from Yug bus station to get there.

TRAIN

The historic **train station** (☎ 845 022; ul Ivan Vazov) was built in 1902. Through the **ticket windows**

(☎ 8am-6pm) on the right you can buy advance tickets for domestic and international services, while same-day tickets can be bought at the **windows** (☎ 24hr) on the left. The **left-luggage office** (☎ 6am-10.45pm) is outside the station.

Seven trains travel daily between Burgas and Sofia (15.70 lv, seven to eight hours), and there are seven to Plovdiv (13.60 lv, five to six hours).

Express trains run from Burgas to Kazanlak (7.50 lv, three hours), Stara Zagora (8.50 lv, three hours) and Sliven (5.40 lv, 1½ hours).

International tickets are also available at the **Rila Bureau** (☎ 845 242; ☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri, to 2.30pm Sat) inside the station.

Getting Around

If you need wheels, TS Travel (p217) offers various models from €48 per day, including unlimited kilometres and insurance (petrol not included).

BLACK SEA COAST

BLACK SEA COAST БУРГАСКИ ЕЗЕРА
The four lakes surrounding Burgas are Pomoriysko (or Pomorie), Atanasovsko, Mandrensko (Mandra) and Burgasko (Burgas). These are collectively known as the Burgas Lakes. Comprising over 9500 hectares, it's the largest wetland system in Bulgaria, and is home to some 255 bird species, representing around 67% of the country's total.

The **Poda Conservation Centre** (☎ 056-850 540; www.bspb-poda.de; admission 1 lv; ☎ 8am-6pm) opened in 1998 under the auspices of the Bulgarian Society for the Protection of Birds (BSPB) and is an admirable effort at wildlife conservation so close to the urban sprawl of Burgas.

In the **Poda Protected Area**, which surrounds the centre, bird lovers will delight in spotting numerous scarce and endangered birds, including Dalmatian pelicans, reef herons, avocets, little terns and red-breasted geese. Most birds can be seen year-round, while others are migratory, stopping over only to breed or see out the winter. The 15 kinds of mammal include Europe's smallest native species, the pygmy shrew, as well as otters and coypu, which escaped from local farms in the 1950s and now live happily unmolested in the reserve.

From the roof of the conservation centre, it is possible to observe some birds with binoculars (free of charge).

To really admire the bird life up close, go on a walk along the signposted, 2.5km **nature trail**

(admission up to 6 people 10 lv). It takes about three hours to complete and there's an explanatory leaflet in English available from the centre. It's recommended that you get a guide (English- or German-speaking), which will cost an extra 15 lv per group.

East of Burgas, the 28-sq-km **Burgasko Lake** (or Lake Vaya) is the largest sea lake in Bulgaria. It is home to pelicans throughout the year but the best time to see them is between April and October. A 1½-hour **boat trip** around this lake costs about 5 lv per person, but a minimum of six passengers is required. A guide is recommended and costs extra. For details, contact the **conservation office** (☎ 056-849 255) in Burgas, or the Poda Conservation Centre. More information is also available at www.pomonet.bg/bourgaslakes.

The **Bourgasko Lakes** map (4 lv), available from the Helikon Bookshop (p213) in Burgas, is excellent. It provides maps (in Bulgarian and English) of each lake, as well as the locations of lookouts, walking trails, access roads and bird-nesting areas.

The conservation centre is poorly signposted on the left, about 8km south of Burgas on the road to Sozopol. It's accessible by taxi (about 5 lv one way), or catch bus 5, 17 or 18 from opposite the Polyclinic III hospital along bul Demokratiya.

SOZOPOL СОЗОПОЛ

☎ 0550 / pop 4800

Ancient Sozopol, with its charming, cobbled old town crammed onto a narrow peninsula, is one of the coast's real highlights. With two superb beaches, genial atmosphere, plentiful accommodation and good transport links, it has long been a popular seaside resort and makes an excellent base for exploring the area. Although not quite as crowded and commercialised as Nesebar, it is becoming ever more popular with international visitors. However, with prices still much lower than in Nesebar, it's definitely worth a stopover.

History

Sozopol is the oldest settlement on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, founded in an area already populated by Thracians in 611 BC by Greek colonists from Miletus, who called their home Apollonia Pontica, in honour of the god Apollo. One of these early settlers was the philosopher and astronomer Anaximander.

SOZOPOL

0 300 m
0 0.2 miles

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To Ropotamo River (17.5km); Primorsko (21km)

Apollonia, ruled by an elected Council of Archons, flourished by trading wine, salt, textiles, pottery and copper, among other things, with neighbouring Thracian tribes and Greek cities, enlarging its territory to cover modern-day Pomorie and Burgas. By the time the Roman Empire began expanding into the region in the 1st century BC, the city had long lost its importance as a commercial power, and in 72 BC Apollonia was sacked, most of the town was destroyed and the famous bronze statue of Apollo was taken to Rome as booty.

Under the Byzantine Empire, and renamed Sozopolis (City of Salvation), the town regained some of its former status as a civilised Greek city, though it found itself on the front line, falling to Khan Tervel in 705, recaptured by the Byzantines in 759 and finally reverting to the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018) in 969. Under Turkish rule, Sozopol declined, and for centuries was little more than a tiny fishing village.

At the end of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78), most citizens of Sozopol fled to Russia to avoid potential retaliation by the Turks. The town remained empty for several decades before being resettled by Turks, Bulgarians and Greeks. During the communist era, the town was promoted as a holiday resort, although not until the 1990s did it really take off, with Russians and Germans being among the more numerous foreign visitors.

Orientation

Sozopol is 31km southeast of Burgas and is divided into two areas. The old town to the north is a collection of narrow cobblestone streets lined with sturdy wooden dwellings built on stone foundations; 180 of these buildings are listed by the Ministry of Culture for their historical and cultural significance. South of the bus station is the new town, often called Harmanite. On the western side of the peninsula is a naval base.

Information

Many foreign exchange offices can be found along the old town's main streets, and around the new town's main square.

Internet Club (ul Republikanska; per hr 2 lv; ☎ 9am–11pm)

Post office (ul Apolonia; ☎ 7am–8.30pm)

United Bulgarian Bank (ul Apolonia 4)

Sights

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Housed in a scruffy concrete building on a lane running down to the port, this **museum** (☎ 22 226; ul Han Krum 2; admission 3 lv; ☎ 8am–5pm, closed Sat & Sun winter) is a little disappointing given Sozopol's long and rich history, but the artefacts and dry English texts at least give you some insight into the town's past. Anchors, amphorae and pottery take up most of the space, including some painted 5th-century-BC vases, tableware imported from Greece and terracotta figurines of actors unearthed at the Apollonia necropolis, on Harmanite Beach (opposite).

ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

Scarcely bothered by the passing tourists, this **museum** (☎ 22 748; ul Kiril & Metodii 34; admission 1 lv; ☎ 8am–6pm) occupies a typical old wooden house and holds an exhibition of provincial costumes, jewellery and household knick-knacks, as well as a display of old photographs of Sozopol. It's worth a quick look, though the historic house itself is probably of most interest.

CHURCHES

Standing on the ruins of an earlier church, the 15th-century **Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa** (ul Anaksimandâr 13; admission 1 lv; ☎ 10am–1pm & 2–6pm) was built below street level, as was required at the time by the Ottoman rulers, and the modest wooden building, set on a courtyard with a giant fig tree, is one of the most picturesque in town. The church contains an exquisite wooden iconostasis, a pulpit carved with bunches of grapes and numerous icons around the walls.

The **Church of Sveti Georgi** (ul Apolonia; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am–1pm & 3–8pm Mon–Sat, 7am–1pm & 3–8pm Sun) is another colourful, icon-filled church, with a fine painting of St George and the Dragon over the entrance. Be forewarned that the custodians here are rather keen to collect the 1 lv 'donation' for admittance from foreigners, and to enforce the dress code (no shorts).

The **Sveti Zosim Chapel** (admission free; ☎ 6am–10pm) is a small working church in the shady gardens opposite the bus station. It was built in the 13th century, on the foundations of an earlier church, to honour the patron saint of sailors.

BEACHES

The town's two beaches are attractive, though waves can be quite high. The 1km-long **Harmanite Beach** is wide and clean and offers a water slide, paddle boats, volleyball nets and beach bars. At the southern end, incongruously, archaeological excavations are continuing on the site of the ancient **Apollonia necropolis**, where a number of stone sarcophagi have been uncovered. It's off-limits to the public, but you can look down on it from the road. The **Town Beach** (or Northern Beach) is another pleasant curve of sand, but it's smaller, gets very crowded, and doesn't offer the same number of beachside cafés, restaurants and bars.

Activities

Sailing boats moored in the port offer 'panoramic cruises' around the peninsula every night in summer (adult/child around 8/5 lv), as well as day trips to Nesebâr (adult/child 40/25 lv). There are a number of boats running similar excursions, including the **Sveti Nikola** (☎ 0889521621); prices can vary according to passenger numbers.

Festivals & Events

The **Apollonia Arts Festival** (www.apollonia.dir.bg), held in the first half of September, is the highlight of Sozopol's cultural calendar and one of the most popular events along the Black Sea coast, receiving national TV coverage. It features all sorts of jazz, pop and alternative music at various venues in the old and new towns, as well as art exhibitions.

Live music, dancing and other shows are often staged through the summer at the modern **amphitheatre** near the Archaeological Museum.

Sleeping

Sozopol has an enormous number of places offering rooms. Look for signs along Republikanska in the new town and pretty much anywhere in the old town.

BUDGET

Sasha Khristov's Private Rooms (☎ 0888759174; ul Venets 17; r from 25 lv) This lovely old family home in the old town faces the art gallery at the very end of the Sozopol peninsula. It comprises good-sized rooms and a large apartment. Book ahead in summer.

Ani Dimitrova's Rooms (☎ 22 753; ul Anaksimandâr 12a; r 30–40 lv) Typical private-room setup in a large and comfortable home run by the friendly, but non-English-speaking Ani. The basic but clean rooms sleep up to four people and have private showers. Look for the hairdresser's sign reading 'Friseur Ani'.

Hotel Orka (☎ 23 977; ul Pârvi Mai 2; d/tr incl breakfast 50/66 lv; ☎) In the centre of the new town, this is a neat, family-run hotel not far from the beach. Rooms are plain but clean, with balconies, TVs and fridges.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Poseidon (☎ 24 134; ul Pârvi Mai 2a; r Jul & Aug 60 lv, Sep–Jun from 40 lv; ☎) In the new town, just off the main square, the Poseidon has small but comfortable rooms, many with balconies. It's a bargain, especially out of season.

Hotel Durna (☎ 0888705023; www.hotel-durna.com; ul Kiril & Metodii; r from 70 lv) This is the only hotel proper in Sozopol's old town. It's a smart and well-appointed place, with gorgeous sea views, overlooking the southern side of the peninsula.

Hotel Sveti Nikola (☎ 23 333; www.hotel-sveti-nikola.com; ul Boruna 1; r 90 lv; ☎) On the seafront just north of Harmanite Bay, this is a bright, modern hotel with standard but comfortable rooms, all with sea-facing balconies. It's in a quiet, private spot perched on the rocks.

Hotel Villa List (☎/fax 22 235; www.hotellist-bg.com; ul Chernomore 5; r Jul & Aug 116–125 lv, s/d Sep–Jun from 37/58 lv; ☎) With a superb setting overlooking the sea, smart rooms and great facilities, this hotel is understandably very popular, and frequently fully booked in summer. The rates, which include breakfast, vary dramatically throughout the year.

TOP END

Hotel Coral (☎ 26 266; ul Lazuren Bryag 5; s/d Jul & Aug 90/120 lv, Sep–Jun from 60/100 lv; ☎) Perched on cliffs overlooking the town beach, the Coral is a stylish complex offering bright and spacious rooms, all with balconies. It also has a spa and a nightclub.

Hotel Parnasse (☎ 24 412; www.parnasse-bg.com; ul Lazuren Bryag 3; r with/without seaview from 110/70 lv, apt 175 lv; ☎) Next to the Hotel Coral, this is a fresh-looking place with a range of rooms decked out in bright tones, and there's a sauna and spa centre.

Eating

Fish, naturally enough, is the local speciality, and several reasonably priced restaurants are strung out along the port area. The best restaurants in town are on ul Morski Skali, and are large and traditional affairs with some spectacular views.

Leo & Lucia (☎ 0878642824; ul Chernomore 1; mains 7-20 lv; ☞ 10am-midnight) Overlooking the town beach, this busy Italian restaurant serves up all the standard fare, such as pasta, pizza and gnocchi, as well as grills, steaks and fish such as grilled sea bass (18 lv).

Old Sailor (☎ 0888225385; ul Kraybrezhna 3; mains 7-25 lv; ☞ lunch & dinner) Marine-themed harbourside restaurant offering all the fishy dishes you can think of. Mussels, crabs, bluefish and shark are just some of the featured menu items, while steaks, chicken fillets and omelettes are among the alternatives.

Di Valli Bistro (☎ 0888982265; ul Morski Skali 35; mains 7-30 lv; ☞ 10am-midnight) Also known as 'The Doctor's House', this modish place offers wonderful sea views and an excellent menu of French and Italian cuisine such as risottos, lamb chops, grilled fish and scallops with caviar sauce sautéed in Cointreau.

Ksantana (☎ 22 454; ul Morski Skali 7; mains 8-15 lv; ☞ lunch & dinner) The split-level terraces of this traditional fish restaurant afford a bird's-eye view of Sveti Ivan Island from the courtyard balcony. The restaurant can be entered at both the top and bottom of the steps and can be easy to miss, with a sign only in Cyrillic.

The pedestrianised section of ul Ropotamo, alongside Harmanite Beach, is packed with cafés, restaurants and bars. They're all pretty much the same, but a couple stand out. **Restaurant Paradise** (mains 4-5 lv; ☞ lunch & dinner) has a raised, off-street eating area and serves reasonably priced steaks, fish and soup. **Havana Club** (mains 4-8 lv; ☞ lunch & dinner), specialising in pizzas, distinguishes itself from the others with a small swimming pool for customers.

Entertainment

Art Club Michel (☎ 0883352622; ul Apolonia 39; tickets about 3 lv) has live music most evenings, while the tiny **Cinema Apoloniya** (ul Apolonia; tickets 5 lv; ☞ Apr-Oct) shows modern English-language films on an outdoor screen.

Shopping

In summer, the streets in the old town are lined with stalls selling the usual array of

tourist tat, but there are some better quality souvenirs to be found. **Art Gallery Laskaridi** (ul Kiril & Metodii) sells contemporary art, jewellery and pottery, as well as souvenir books about Sozopol. **Gallery Bissera** (ul Apolonia 52), set up in an old wooden barn behind the cinema, offers a similar range of local paintings and ceramics, as well as some antique oddments.

Getting There & Away

The small public **bus station** (ul Han Krum) is between the old and new towns. Buses leave for Burgas (2.10 lv, 40 minutes) about every 30 minutes between 6am and 9pm in summer, and about once an hour in the low season. Quicker and more comfortable minibuses also service this route for about the same price.

Only a couple of buses a day go directly to Ahtopol (2.50 lv, one hour), via Primorsko (1.40 lv, 20 minutes) and Kiten (1.80 lv, 30 minutes). Public buses leave up to three times a day for Shumen, Stara Zagora, Sofia and Haskovo.

Larger and more comfortable private buses arrive and depart from spots around the new town's main square. Three or four private buses go to Sofia daily, one or two depart for Plovdiv, and another one or two travel up and down the southern coast as part of the overnight Haskovo-Ahtopol service.

Getting Around

Sozopol is easy to get around on foot and there's no need to hire one of the pricey cabs from around the bus stop. If you do need a cab, get one on ul Republikanska, the main road in the new town. If you need a car, there are several travel agencies around the new town's main square, pl Harmanite, which can arrange car rental from about €40 to €45 per day, including unlimited kilometres and insurance (petrol not included). In the old town, try the **Property Shop** (☎ 22 305; ul Apolonia). In summer, you'll need to make arrangements a few days ahead.

ROPOTAMO NATURE RESERVE НАЦИОНАЛЕН РЕЗЕРВАТ РОПОТАМО

This reserve was established in 1940 to protect fragile landscapes of extensive marshes and the largest sand dunes in Bulgaria, as well as rare flora such as the endemic sand lily. The reserve also protects some 257 species of birds, reptiles such as snakes and turtles, and mullet and carp. Fishing is illegal.

At several well-signposted places along the road between Burgas and Primorsko, visitors can stop and admire some of the reserve, and wander along short **walking trails** where explanations (in English) about the local flora, fauna and natural landscapes are provided. The reserve also encompasses Thracian megaliths and tiny Sveti Toma Island, which hosts Bulgaria's only wild cacti. (It's also known as Snake Island, after the indigenous water snakes that live hereabouts.)

Where the main road between Sozopol and Primorsko crosses the Ropotamo River is the major entrance to a **parkland** (admission free, parking 3 lv; ☞ dawn-dusk). There are a couple of cafés and picnic spots, and some short **hiking trails**, but most visitors come for a **boat ride** (40/70min trip per person 8/10 lv) along the river. To get to the parkland entrance by public transport, take any bus or minibus south of Sozopol, and get off at the prominent, well-signposted bridge, found around 10km or 15 minutes beyond Sozopol.

PRIMORSKO ПРИМОРСКО

☎ 0550 / pop 3100

Primorsko (meaning 'by the sea') is a busy resort 52km southeast of Burgas and popular mainly with Bulgarian families. It is far less developed than resorts to the north, although the long, crowded beach is quite attractive and the usual water sports are available, such as jet-skiing (10 minutes, 40 lv) and paddleboating (one hour, 10 lv), although the water is very shallow at low tide. Operating at Primorsko's tiny airport, **SkyDive Bulgaria** (☎ 0899868984; www.skydivebulgaria.com) is the place to go to for throwing yourself out of planes. The town centre, meanwhile, is crammed with takeaway stands and tacky souvenir stalls, but little else.

From the town square, along bul Treti Mart (the main road into town), it's a short walk south to the beach. The best shops are along ul Chernomore, which heads southeast from the square.

Sleeping

The **Demin Agency** (☎ 32 870; bus station; per person 25-35 lv) organises rooms at rates that vary according to the location and facilities. However, in summer many will demand a minimum stay of five days or more. If it's closed, call **Denka Mincheva** (☎ 0883318835) for assistance.

Spektar Palace (☎ 33 529; www.spektar-palace.com; ul Treti Mart 82; s/d/tr 60/80/110 lv; ☞ ☎) Closer to the

bus station than the beach, this is one of the best hotels in town, with excellent facilities, including a small pool. Being a little out of the town centre means it's a lot quieter than most hotels.

Hotel Prima Vera (☎ 33 488; hotel_primavera@abv.bg; ul Chernomore 46; d 60 lv; ☞ ☎) A decent town centre option with modern, clean rooms and a good pizzeria downstairs. It's right in the thick of the action so some rooms may be quite noisy in summer.

Hotel Sunarita (☎ 33 222; www.sunarita.com; ul Treti Mart 29; r/apt incl breakfast Jul & Aug €40/60, Sep-Jun from €21/31; ☞ ☎) Another welcoming central hotel with unfussy, airy rooms, a sauna and a good on-site restaurant. Bikes are available for rent (one hour, 2 lv) and free pick-up from Burgas is offered for stays of seven days or more.

Eating

Kebabs, pizzas and burgers from stalls around town seem to be standard fare for most visitors, but there is a handful of decent restaurants here, too: ul Chernomore is the best place to look.

Bistro Silva (Primorsko Beach; mains from 2.50 lv; ☞ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Set right on the beach, this is a great place to grab a quick, cheap lunch. You can sit on the main wooden terrace or in an old fishing boat alongside that's fitted out with tables, and tucked into basic dishes such as moussaka and chicken and rice.

Kavaka (☎ 0889835070; ul Chernomore; mains 4-10 lv; ☞ 10am-midnight) Traditional tavern-style place doing the usual line in steaks, grills and salads, as well as some less obvious dishes such as stewed pork ribs and breaded shark.

Restaurant Chaika (☎ 32 990; ul Chernomore 40; mains 5-20 lv; ☞ 8am-midnight) One of the more modern, upscale options, serving a big menu of mostly fish dishes such as grilled mackerel, though steaks are also available.

Getting There & Away

Primorsko's bus station, 1km from the town centre, is where all public transport arrives and leaves. From here, there are buses to Kiten (1 lv, 10 minutes, roughly every 30 minutes). There are two buses to Ahtopol (3.50 lv, 45 minutes, 8am and 11.30pm) and several buses a day to Tsarevo (3 lv, 30 minutes) and Sozopol (3 lv, 35 minutes). Also, buses stop regularly at Primorsko on the way between Burgas, Sofia or Haskovo and Ahtopol or Kiten, but many of these services pass through, in either direction,

late in the evening. In addition, buses travel daily to Burgas (5 lv, one hour, every 30 minutes between 6am and 7pm). About seven private buses a day also go to Sofia, and several travel to Stara Zagora, Plovdiv and Sliven via Sozopol and Burgas.

KITEN КИТЕН

☎ 0550 / pop 1020

Although not as bustling as Primorsko, the little resort of Kiten, 5km to the south, is developing quickly, with numerous hotel complexes rising up in recent years and an increasing number of foreign tourists, especially Czechs and Scandinavians, discovering its once hidden charms. Excavations have indicated evidence of Thracian and Roman settlement in the area, but there is little obvious history here today. There's no town centre as such, so all shops, restaurants and hotels are dotted along the roads between the two beaches; the biggest concentration is on ul Atliman, which is lined with restaurants and bars.

The northern **Atliman Beach** is along a horseshoe-shaped bay, one of the cleanest and prettiest along the Black Sea coast, and the hills in the background thankfully hinder all possible future development. **Morski Beach** to the south is sheltered, ideal for swimming and has plenty of beachside cafés.

Sleeping & Eating

Eos Hotel Complex (☎ 36 865; ul Petrova niva 7; r/apt 60/100 lv; 📶 📺 📺) Conveniently located a short walk from the bus stop, though a little further from the beaches, the Eos is a friendly hotel with facilities including a small pool, sauna and gym. The rooms are simple, bright and clean, but not all have air-con, or even fans, so check a few out first.

Hotel Marina (☎ /fax 36 984; Kiten Marina; r/apt from 60/100 lv; 📶 📺 📺) Overlooking Kiten's pocket-sized marina and with its own scrap of private beach, this is a fresh-looking hotel with a range of bright rooms; those with sea views cost marginally more. There's a restaurant, gym and sauna, and yacht trips can be arranged. Prices fall by about a third outside the summer months.

Continental Hotel (☎ 36 131; www.continental9000.com; r/apt incl breakfast 70/128 lv; 📶 📺 📺) Opposite the Dodo Beach hotel, this is a smaller, modern complex that has light, attractive rooms, all with balconies and most with sea views.

It also has a terrace restaurant, garden and nightclub.

Dodo Beach (☎ 36 294; www.dodo-beach.com; ul Urdoviza 8; s/d/tr incl full board from 140/190/285 lv; 📶 📺 📺) With superb views over the coast, this big glass box has some of the best rooms and facilities in town, although the seemingly obligatory full-board arrangement won't be ideal for everyone.

All the hotels listed have restaurants; try **Eos Restaurant** (mains 2-3 lv) for cheap grills and salads.

Getting There & Away

The bus station is at the top end of ul Strandzha, at the junction of the roads to Primorsko and Ahtopol. Daily buses to Burgas (5.50 lv, one hour, hourly) travel via Primorsko and Sozopol (3.50 lv, 40 minutes). Direct buses to Plovdiv (15 lv to 18 lv, four to five hours) and Sofia (via Stara Zagora; 25 lv to 28 lv, seven to eight hours) leave throughout the day. All buses and minibuses travelling to or from Ahtopol will also stop in Kiten to pick up passengers.

TSAREVO ЦАРЕВО

☎ 0550 / pop 6300

Spread lazily over two small peninsulas jutting out into the Black Sea, Tsarevo is a quiet, elegant little town, once a popular holiday spot for the Bulgarian royal family. Called Vasiliko until 1934, it was renamed Tsarevo ('royal place') in honour of Tsar Boris III; the communists then renamed it Michurin (after a Soviet botanist) in 1950, and it reverted once again in 1991. The centre, on the northern peninsula, has a calm, affluent atmosphere and feels more like a real town than some of Tsarevo's seaside resort neighbours.

Orientation & Information

The post office, internet centre and cafés are found along the pedestrianised main street, ul Han Asparuh.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 52 162; www.tzarevo.info; ul Mikhail Gerdzhikov; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-noon Sat & Sun) Friendly office with English-speaking staff and lots of brochures, leaflets and maps.

Sights

Overlooking the rocky headland at the end of ul Han Asparuh are the peaceful **Sea Gardens**, offering dramatic panoramic views across the Black Sea. Other sights of interest include the **Church of Sveti Tsar Boris-Mikhail**

(ul Hristo Botev), dedicated to the former king, and the tiny **Church of the Holy Trinity**, built in 1810 above the beach, accessed by steps on the northern side of the headland. It's a small but picturesque scrap of sand with a couple of bars.

Across the wide bay, the southern peninsula is of less interest, dominated by modern apartments and holiday homes, although the headland, reached by scrambling over rocks, has Tsarevo's best **beach**. Sadly, this is no secret cove, though, as it's also occupied by the giant **Serenity Bay** hotel.

Sleeping & Eating

Diskos Melany (☎ 52 460; ul Mikhail Gerdzhikov 18; r 15-20 lv; 🕒 24hr) An agency on the road from the bus station into town that can arrange private rooms, but nobody speaks English. It also arranges car and bike rental and excursions.

Hotel Zebra (☎ 55 111; www.hotel-zebra.com; ul Han Asparuh 10; s/d/apt Jul & Aug 54/64/120 lv, Sep-Jun from 40/44/76 lv; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Near the Sea Gardens, this very modern complex offers superb value. The large, comfortable rooms all have balconies and sparkling bathrooms, and there's an outdoor pool and restaurant.

Hotel Diana (☎ 54 855; ul Hristo Botev 2; r/apt 55/100 lv; 📶) Another fairly new block in a central but quiet location, offering good-sized rooms with balconies.

Serenity Bay (☎ 55 300; serenity.bay@abv.bg; d/apt 90/130 lv; 📶 📺 📺 📺) Dominating the best beach on the southern peninsula, this is a huge holiday complex popular with Scandinavian package-tour groups. It has top facilities, including a spa, but there's nothing else nearby and it looks a little out of place. All meals cost extra.

The restaurant of the **Hotel Diana** (mains 2.50-5 lv; 🕒 breakfast, lunch & dinner) is a good place for cheap salads and chicken-and-chips type dishes, while fresh fish is on the menu at the harbourside **Ribarska Sreshta** (mains 4-10 lv; 🕒 7am-midnight).

Getting There & Away

Tsarevo's bus station is at the top of ul Mikhail Gerdzhikov, about 2km west of the centre. Minibuses to Burgas (6 lv, 50 minutes) run roughly every 30 minutes to one hour between 6am and 8pm via Kiten and Primorsko, and there are two daily buses to Sofia (25 lv, eight hours, 11.20am and 11.30pm).

AHTOPOL АХТОПОЛ

☎ 0550 / pop 1500

An agreeable place to enjoy some sun and sea, Ahtopol still has a quiet, remote air about it. The beach is about 800m from the town centre and below some hills, so few buildings blot the landscape. However, an €80 million marina, with room for 500 yachts, is currently being planned for the resort, so the whole character of the place may change dramatically in coming years.

The town 'centre' is based around the park where the bus stops, though the post office and administration buildings are about 500m east of this. To find the beach, walk southwest from the bus stop along ul Sveti Nikola towards the main coastal road for about 300m, and then head northwest along any laneway.

Sleeping & Eating

Coloured House (☎ 0887561258; www.colours.ahtopol.com; ul Zelenika 7; s/d/tr 39/59/69 lv; 📶 📺) Lives up to its name with a bright, multicoloured façade, though the comfy rooms aren't quite so loud.

Hotel Eskada Beach (☎ 62 035; www.hoteleskada.com; s/d Jul & Aug 56/86 lv, Sep-Jun from 40/48 lv; 📶 📺 📺 📺) On the seafront promenade, Eskada offers bright, stylish rooms, some with great sea views, as well as pools, a gym and a supermarket.

Hotel Lola Garden (☎ 62 020; www.lolagarden.com; ul Preobrazhenska 7; r/ste €33/46; 📶 📺 📺) A smart central option with airy rooms. It runs various excursions and windsurfing lessons are available.

All the above hotels have their own restaurants.

Getting There & Away

Four buses a day depart from the **bus station** (☎ 0889998847) for Burgas (6 lv, 1½ hours) via Primorsko and Sozopol, while four buses go south to Sinemoret (1 lv, 10 minutes), one of which continues to Rezevo (1.50 lv, 30 minutes), the tiny village on the closed Turkish border. To cross into Turkey, you need to travel inland to Malko Tàrnovo.

STRANDZHA NATURE PARK ПРИРОДЕН ПАРКСТРАНДЖА

☎ 05952

In Bulgaria's southeastern corner is the remote Strandzha Nature Park, established in 1995. The 1161 sq km of rolling hills protect

the country's most diverse vegetation, including vast forests of oak and beech, as well as 40 species of fish, 261 types of birds (almost 70% of those found in Bulgaria), 65 species of mammals (six are endangered) and various unexcavated Byzantine fortresses.

The park's ecotourism potential is slowly being developed, but there was public outrage in July 2007 when Bulgaria's Supreme Court declared the park's protected status void, allowing previously illegal hotel construction to continue. Parliament moved quickly to restore Strandzha's protection, and for now the park appears to have been saved from excessive development. Visiting the area is not easy without private transport, though, and don't stray too close to the Turkish border: this is an area of smugglers and suspicious border-patrol guards.

The park is ideal for **hiking** because it's sparsely populated and relatively flat. Several short hikes (1km to 8km long), and longer treks (about 20km) between the coast and the centre of the park, are detailed in the colourful *Nature Park Strandzha* map (1:70,000; 4 lv), available at the Helikon Bookshop (p213) in Burgas. The park also contains what are probably the most undeveloped stretches of sandy **beach** along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast. If you visit in early June, make sure you witness the **fire-dancing festival** (p23) in Bulgari. The website www.discoverstrandja.com is a good source of information; it also offers day trips (€57) around the main sights if you're pressed for time.

The administrative centre of the park is Malko Târnovo, an economically depressed town in the southwest. The **History Museum** (☎ 2998; mtarnovo/burgasmuseums.bg) and the **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 2126) contain some displays about the park. For more details, contact the **park office** (☎/fax 2963; strandjapark@yahoo.com; ul Janko Maslinov 1, Malko Târnovo).

From the Zapad bus station in Burgas, buses leave for Malko Târnovo (6.70 lv, three hours, four or five a day) via Bulgari, but transport to other villages in the park is infrequent. If you have a private vehicle, Ahtopol and Kiten are convenient bases for day trips to the park.

SINEMORETS СИНЕМОРЕЦ

☎ 0550 / pop 300

Sinemorets (Si-ne-mor-ets) is the Black Sea's last largely undiscovered hideaway, although

it seems that the relentless pace of development along the coastline has set it firmly in the developers' sights. Despite the presence of an enormous hotel on the village's best beach, the atmosphere of remote village life and a generally slow-paced existence remains, and it's a superb base for visiting the nearby Strandzha Nature Park and **hiking** and **bird-watching** in the surrounding countryside.

The two **beaches** are excellent – this is one of the Black Sea's best places to escape the crowds and enjoy pristine white sand and clear water.

Sleeping & Eating

Atlas Hotel (☎ 66 200; www.hotelatlas-sinemoretz.com; ul Butamya; d/apt incl breakfast from €30/60; ☎) This modern place has light, fairly simple rooms; the apartments are spacious and come with two balconies. Prices are about a third less outside the summer months.

Asti Arthotel (☎ 65 560; www.asti-bg.com; s/d incl breakfast €40/60; ☎) All 26 rooms at this fresh hotel are apartments fitted with tiny kitchens. It's good value, and there's a tennis court, gym and restaurant on site.

Bella Vista Beach Club (☎ 66 138; r/apt incl full board €52/67; ☎) Overlooking Sinemorets' charming south beach, this massive place caters mainly to package tourists, although walk-in guests are welcome. Facilities are excellent, but this seems such an out-of-place venture. Weekly rates are available.

Getting There & Away

Transport to/from Sinemorets is very poor. From further up the coast you'll need to travel to Ahtopol and change there for one of the four daily minibuses to Sinemorets (1 lv, 15 minutes). There are no taxis in Sinemorets.

CENTRAL COAST

POMORIE ПОМОРИЕ

☎ 0596 / pop 14,600

Like neighbouring Nesebâr, Pomorie sits on a narrow peninsula, and until it was ravaged by fire in 1906 was almost as picturesque. There, however, the similarities end. The modern town centre has a lazy charm, but while the beach is serviceable, the water is choked with odorous seaweed. Pomorie is

very much a Bulgarian resort, almost entirely bypassed by foreign tourists, but it's a relatively cheap base from which to visit Nesebâr and Burgas. The town is also famous for its salt lakes, therapeutic mud and spa treatments.

Sights & Activities

On a dusty road about 2km out of town, heading towards the main bus station, is **Sveti Georgi Monastery** (ul Knyaz Boris I). Built in 1856, it's a small complex set in pretty gardens with a quaint, icon-filled church and a belltower covered in saintly frescoes. It's also possible to stay here (see below). There are a few churches worth a look in town too, including the white-washed **Sveta Bogoroditsa Church**, in the shady park in the town centre, while in the older part of town, with its few cobblestone streets and wooden houses, is the **Preobrazhenie Gospodne Church** (ul Han Kubrat 1; ☎ 8.30am-12.30pm & 4-10pm), dating from 1765.

It's often windy at the beach, making it ideal for **windsurfing** (per hr 10 lv), while there are several stalls along the beachfront where you can hire **scooters** (30min/1hr 5/10 lv) and **golf buggies** (30 min/1hr 15/25 lv).

Massages, mud baths, saunas, hydrotherapy and countless other treatments and programmes are available at a number of hotels.

Sleeping & Eating

Pensioners holding cardboard signs gather near the main bus station and further along ul Knyaz Boris I, offering private rooms from around 10 lv per person, and many houses on this road have accommodation signs for *svobodni stai* (Свободни стаи) in their windows.

Sveti Georgi Monastery (ul Knyaz Boris I; r 8-15 lv; ☎) If you're looking for something different, this tiny monastery rents out a few rooms. They're fairly basic, and unless you have your own transport the location's none too convenient, but it's certainly atmospheric. It doesn't take reservations – just turn up, and there'll probably be space available.

Zeus Hotel (☎ 22 770; www.zeus-pm.bg; ul Rakovski 9; s/d/apt 50/60/100 lv; ☎) Located in the centre of town, Zeus is one of the newer hotels, with a restaurant and bar attached. All rooms have balconies and come with fridges, TVs and kettles. Breakfast is 4 lv extra.

St George Centre (☎ 25 180; stg@pomonet.bg; ul Targovska 5; r incl breakfast 60 lv; ☎) Breezy

seafront complex in a quiet location, offering some surprisingly good facilities for the price, including a pool, sauna, gym, massage room and restaurant. All rooms have sea-facing balconies, and the whole complex, including the pool, is geared to the needs of disabled visitors.

Interhotel Pomorie (☎ 22 440; www.pomorie.com /ih-pomorie; ul Yavorov 3; d incl breakfast 90 lv; ☎) Set on a rocky outcrop on the southeastern tip of the peninsula, this hotel is the best in town. Most rooms have sea views, and there's a nightclub and a spa centre that offers numerous therapeutic treatments.

Opposite Interhotel Pomorie, **Pri Slavi** (mains 3-4 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) is a welcoming garden café serving simple fare such as soups, salads and grills, but there's no English menu. The beachfront promenade, ul Kraybrezhna, is lined with restaurants, while better options (with multilingual menus) are found near the Preobrazhenie Gospodne Church, including **Restaurant Tsarevets** (ul Knyaz Boris I; mains 4-10 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner), which offers grilled pork, chicken and fish dishes.

Getting There & Away

There are two bus stations in Pomorie: the main bus station is about 3km outside the town centre (and accessible by local bus 1 or taxi), and the central station is in front of the town hall. From the latter, it's about 200m northeast to the beach and 100m south to the town centre.

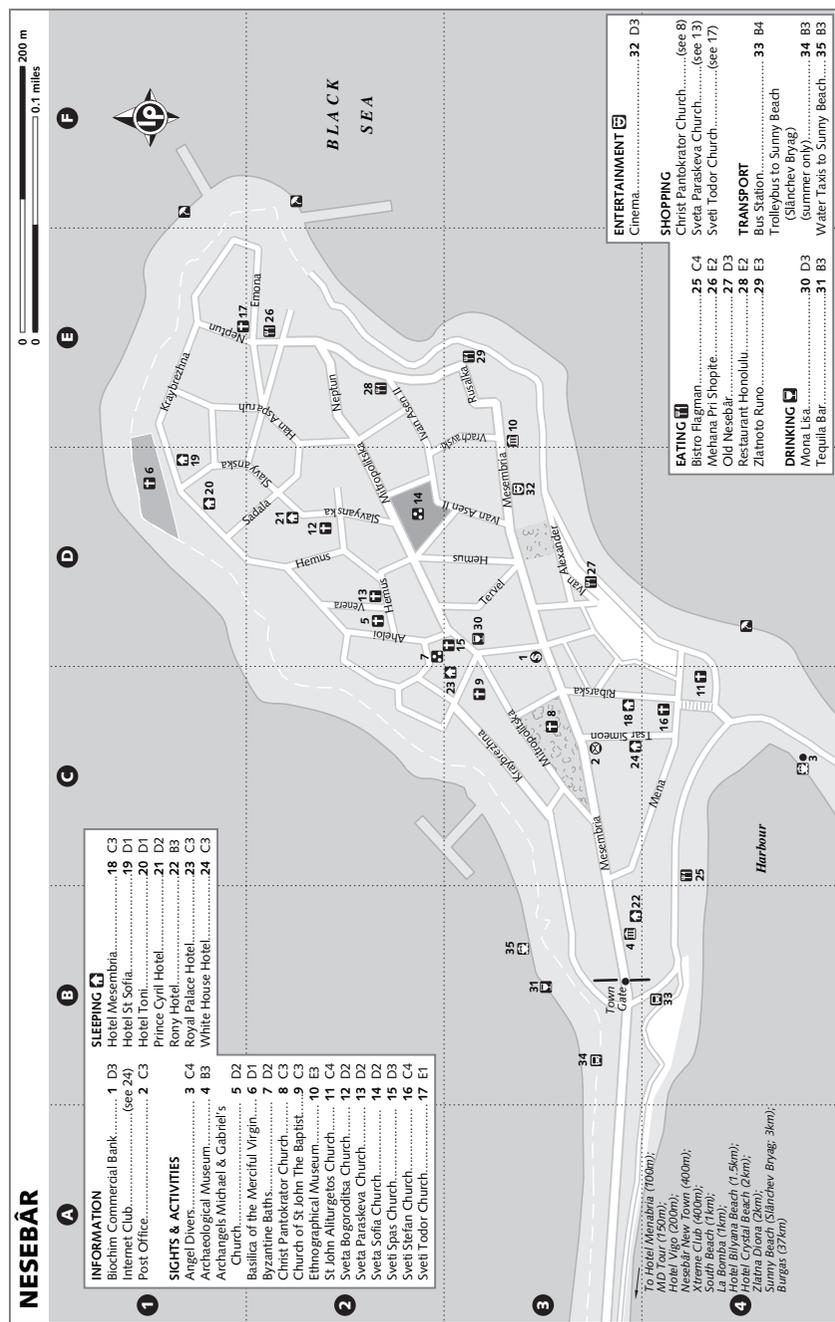
The regular buses and minibuses between Burgas and Nesebâr and/or Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) invariably stop only at the main bus station. From this station, seven or eight daily buses go to Sofia (26 lv, seven or eight hours), and several travel to Plovdiv, Sliven, Varna and Stara Zagora.

Every one to 1½ hours, daily minibuses marked 'Pomorie Central' (Поморие Център) leave from Burgas (2 lv, 30 minutes) and Sunny Beach (1.80 lv, 30 minutes), stopping at Pomorie's small central bus station.

NESEBÂR НЕСЕБЪР

☎ 0554 / pop 10,200

On a small, rocky island 37km northeast of Burgas, connected to the mainland by a narrow, artificial isthmus, pretty-as-a-postcard Nesebâr (Ne-se-bar) is the jewel in the Bulgarian Black Sea crown. Famous for its surprisingly numerous, albeit mostly ruined,



medieval churches, it has inevitably become heavily commercialised and is virtually under siege from tour groups and souvenir sellers during the high season. Designated by Unesco as a World Heritage site, Nesebâr is a beautiful town, and also has a handful of interesting museums. Unlike Sozopol, Nesebâr has plenty of decent hotels in the old town, and with Sunny Beach (Slânchev Bryag) just across the bay, you have every conceivable water sport on hand, too.

History

It was Greek colonists who founded what became the thriving trading port of Mesembria in 512 BC, although most of their temples, gates and towers were submerged after the level of the Black Sea rose around 2000 years ago. To avoid the sorry fate of Apollonia (Sozopol), the populace of Mesembria accepted the Roman invaders in 72 BC, although the city's status as a major trading centre gradually declined.

Under Byzantine rule from AD 395, Mesembria regained its former glory as a centre of commercial, strategic and religious importance, and during the 5th and 6th centuries, several grand churches were erected and the fortifications extended. After the Bulgar invasion in 812, the town was renamed Nesebâr; over the following centuries, it passed back and forth between Byzantium and the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018), but remained largely unscathed. It was one of the last cities still under Byzantine stewardship when Constantinople fell in 1453; the Turks took Nesebâr the same year.

Under Ottoman rule, Nesebâr continued as the seat of a Greek bishop, and existing fortifications were strengthened to defend the city against pirates. During the Bulgarian National Revival of the 18th and 19th centuries, Nesebâr prospered, and wealthy merchants built grand villas here, some of which remain today. Overshadowed by Varna and later by Burgas, Nesebâr ceased to be an active trading town from the early 20th century, and these days survives almost entirely on tourism.

Orientation

The old town is on a rocky outcrop, 850m long and 300m wide. It's connected to the new town on the mainland by a narrow causeway

that goes through the 3000-year-old fortress walls, built by the Thracians and later fortified by the Greeks and Byzantines. The new town has the newest and biggest hotels, several overlooking South Beach, but all the sights are in the old town.

Probably the best available map featuring the old town is *Nesebâr, Sunny Beach and Sveti Vlas*, published by Pure Bulgaria.

Information

Every second or third shop seems to be a foreign exchange office. Many of these change travellers cheques but charge different commissions, so shop around.

Biochim Commercial Bank (ul Mesembria; ☎ 8.30am–7.45pm Mon–Fri yr-round, 11am–7.45pm Sat & Sun Apr–Oct) The only bank in town that changes travellers cheques. Also has an ATM that accepts major credit cards.

Internet Club (White House Hotel, ul Tsar Simeon 2; per hr 2.50 lv)

Post office (ul Mesembria; ☎ 8am–8pm Tue–Sat) Has a telephone centre.

Sights

A multiticket (adult/child 10/5 lv), apparently sold only at the Archaeological Museum, gives access to Sveti Stefan Church, Sveti Spas Church, the Ethnographical Museum and the Archaeological Museum. Cheaper tickets, valid for the Archaeological Museum plus one or two of the other sights, are also available.

CHURCHES

Nesebâr was once home to about 80 churches and chapels, but most are now in ruins. Characteristic of the Nesebâr style of church design are the horizontal strips of white stone and red brick, which are offset by striped blind arches resting on the vertical pilasters, the façades decorated with green ceramic discs. Except where indicated, each church is open daily during daylight hours and admission is free.

No visitor can help but be impressed by the ruins of the **Sveta Sofia Church** (ul Mitropolitska), also known as the Old Metropolitan Church. Dating as far back as the 5th century, this vast, three-nave basilica was rebuilt in the 9th century as part of a huge complex that encompassed the Bishop's palace. It remained Nesebâr's chief ecclesiastical centre until about 1257, when the church was ransacked by the Venetians. It contained three naves and

boasted a spacious interior with high walls and wide windows. Today the ruins form the centrepiece of a busy plaza surrounded by cafés and artists' street stalls.

Typical of the characteristic Nesebâr construction is the well-preserved **Christ Pantokrator Church** (ul Mesembria). Built in the mid-14th century, it's decorated with green ceramic discs and intricate red brick patterns, and is topped with a sturdy belltower. An unusual feature at the eastern end is the frieze of swastikas, an ancient solar symbol. The church is now used as a commercial art gallery.

Probably the most beautiful church in old Nesebâr was the **St John Aliturgetos Church**, accessible down some steps from the end of ul Ribarska. Built in about the mid-14th century and dedicated to St John the Unbeliever, the church was mostly destroyed by an earthquake in 1913. Concerts are sometimes held here in summer.

The **Church of St John the Baptist** (ul Mitropolitska) was built in the 10th century and features some of the best-preserved murals from the 14th and 17th centuries. It's also now occupied by an art gallery.

The **Basilica of the Merciful Virgin** (ul Kraybrezhna), overlooking the sea, dates back to the 6th century; it became a monastery in the 14th century. The fortified tower alongside it was built as a response to pirate raids along the coast; eventually abandoned and partly swallowed by the sea, it was only rediscovered by archaeologists in the 1920s. Excavations are still ongoing nearby.

Sveti Spas Church (ul Aheloi; adult/child 2.50/1.50 lv; ☎ 10am-1.30pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1.30pm Sat & Sun) is a small, single-nave church built in 1609; like all churches established during Ottoman rule, it had to be built below street level. Some comparatively well-preserved murals can be viewed inside.

Sveti Stefan Church (ul Ribarska; adult/child 4/2 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 1.30-5pm Sat & Sun) is the best preserved in town, originally built in the 11th century and reconstructed 500 years later. It's a relatively large, three-nave basilica, renowned for its rare and impressive murals dating from between the 16th and 18th centuries, which cover virtually the entire interior. The Byzantine-style paintings depict scenes from the life of the Virgin as well as numerous saints, and restoration is ongoing. Also of note are the elaborate 16th-century iconostasis and the gilded

18th-century pulpit. Try to come early, as the church sees a rapid succession of large, multilingual guided tour groups throughout the day in summer.

The **Archangels Michael & Gabriel's Church** (ul Hemus) was built over the course of a few decades during the 13th and 14th centuries. It remains in relatively good condition, but is usually kept locked up. Very little is known about the origins of **Sveti Todor Church** (ul Neptun), which has been partially restored and is now an art gallery with irregular opening hours. A fine example of 13th-century architecture is the **Sveta Paraskeva Church** (ul Hemus), which has only one nave and one apse. The building is now occupied by yet another art gallery. The relatively plain, 19th-century **Sveta Bogoroditsa Church** (ul Slavyanska) is the only functioning church in town and modestly dressed visitors are welcome. (Shawls are provided at the entrance for bare-armed women.) The typically colourful interior is splashed with saintly murals, and if you *still* haven't seen enough icons, there's a small **church museum** (admission 1 lv) attached, with examples going back to the 13th century.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 46 012; ul Mesembria 2; adult/child 4/2 lv; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 9am-1pm & 1.30-6pm Sat & Sun) has a fair collection of Hellenistic and Roman-era tombstones on the ground floor, as well as an unusual triple-image statuette of Hecate, goddess of witchcraft and fertility, from the 2nd century BC. Other exhibits include Greek pottery, Thracian gold jewellery and ancient anchors, while Hellenistic humour is on show on a bronze jug depicting Dionysus, god of wine, supporting a sozzled Silenus, god of drunkenness. The basement holds a collection of religious icons recovered from Nesebâr's numerous churches, including a 13th-century image of the Virgin.

ETHNOGRAPHICAL MUSEUM

Ignored by the shopaholics and forgotten by the tour groups is this small **museum** (☎ 46 012; ul Mesembria 28; adult/child 2/1 lv; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Sat). Inside a typical wooden Bulgarian National Revival building (constructed in about 1840), it features regional costumes and displays about weaving. All labels are in Bulgarian and German.

BYZANTINE BATHS

Below present ground level just behind the Church of Sveti Spas are the partly excavated remains of this once huge 6th-century **Byzantine baths** complex. Though not much to look at now, in its day this was one of the region's biggest and best spas, renowned for its curative waters; allegedly the Byzantine Emperor Constantine IV dropped by and 'cured his legs' here in 680. The baths were destroyed during Khan Krum's invasion in AD 812.

BEACHES

There are a few scrappy beaches around the coast of the old town, which are popular with some locals and visitors, but they're small and rocky and the water is often choked with seaweed. Around 1.5km west of the old town is **South Beach**, a long and well managed stretch of sand that has seen some major developments over the last few years. All the usual water sports are available, including **jet-skiing** (10min 40 lv), **water-skiing** (10min 15 lv), **windsurfing** (1hr 10 lv) and **pedalos** (1hr 10 lv). The beach is lined with several giant hotel complexes, although the officially protected sand dunes at the far end should, hopefully, prevent further construction. The longer sandy shores of Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag), just a few kilometres up the coast, are an alternative option.

Activities

Angel Divers (☎ 0889427355; www.angel-divers.com; ☎ 9am-6pm May-Sep), located in a small booth at the ferry port, is a PADI-certified diving company offering single dives for €45, wreck diving (off Sozopol) for €90 and four-day open-water courses for €245. It has another outlet on the beach at Sveti Vlas (p236).

Tours

MD Tour (☎ 43 439; ul Christo Kudev 17), in the new town, runs all kinds of excursions, including half-day yacht cruises (adult/child including lunch €22/12), half-day jeep safaris (adult/child including lunch €30/20) and day trips to Istanbul (adult/child €45/25).

Sleeping

Unless you book in advance, accommodation in the old town can be hard to come by in the summer months, but out of season supply far outstrips demand. Private rooms are the best option for budget travellers –

ladies offering a room or two meet tourists off the bus.

BUDGET

Hotel Mesembria (☎ 0899102770; ul Ribarska 6; r 40 lv) The only real budget option in the old town, which means it's often full. The location's excellent but it's a grotty old place, and rooms don't even have fans, although they do have balconies.

Hotel Crystal Beach (☎ 46 615; off ul Ivan Vazov; r/apt 50/80 lv; ☎) Set back from the western end of South Beach, this is the only borderline budget option here. It's an older motel-style block on an unnamed lane just off the main road. Pretty simple, but a bargain for beach bums.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Toni (☎ 42 403; ul Kraybrezhna 20; r Jul & Aug 60 lv, Sep-Jun 40 lv; ☎) In a great spot overlooking the sea, Hotel Toni is very reasonably priced, so is regularly full in summer (when it suggests advance reservations of as much as one month). Rooms are simple but clean, and the chatty host is very helpful.

White House Hotel (☎ 42 488; www.white-house-13.8k.com; ul Tsar Simeon 2; r low/high season 50/70 lv; ☎ ☎) Rooms here are neat and clean, if a little cramped, and all feature TV, fridge and usually a balcony, offering good value for Nesebâr. The old town's only internet café is on the ground floor. Breakfast is 5 lv extra.

Prince Cyril Hotel (☎ 42 215; princecyril_hotel@abv.bg; ul Slavyanska 9; r incl breakfast 70 lv; ☎) Located on a quiet, cobbled, souvenir stall-free lane, this is a friendly place with a variety of rooms, all with TV and fridge, but not all with air-con; check a few out first and try to avoid the cramped, top-floor fan-only rooms with their sloping ceilings.

Royal Palace Hotel (☎ 46 491; www.nessebarpalace.com; ul Mitropolitska 19; s/d incl breakfast from 80/110 lv; ☎ ☎) Overlooking the ruins of the Byzantine baths complex, this is among the more attractive hotels in the old town, offering elegant but unfussy rooms, including some with disabled access, with fridges and TVs (though there's only one single). There's a good restaurant and summer garden on-site.

Hotel St Sofia (☎ 45 061; www.stsofiahotel.hit.bg; ul Kraybrezhna 24b; d/apt incl breakfast 85/120 lv; ☎) Attractive three-star hotel facing the Basilica of the Merciful Virgin, with some wonderful sea views. All rooms have a TV and fridge. Prices rise in August.

Rony Hotel (☎ 44 002; www.hotelrony.com; ul Chayka 1; r/stc incl breakfast Jun–mid-Sep €50/87, mid-Sep–May €23/39; 🍷) Right behind the Archaeological Museum, the Rony is an old-style wooden villa with a dozen rooms – some of which have terraces and sea views – and a decent restaurant, too. It books up quickly in summer.

TOP END

Hotel Menabria (☎ 46 745; www.hotelmenabria.com; ul Ivan Vazov 2; s/d/apt 100/120/240 lv; 🍷 🍷) On the other side of the isthmus from the old town, the Menabria is a modern hotel built around an old wooden windmill. The location, near the road junction towards Sunny Beach can be a bit busy, traffic-wise, but the views back to town are great.

Hotel Bilyana Beach (☎ 46 645; www.bilyanabeach.com; South Beach; s/d Jul & Aug 170/180 lv, Sep–Jun from 92/122 lv; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Shimmering, glassy complex right on the beach with 135 rooms and suites, all with balconies and sea views. It's a little overpriced, though it has good facilities, including a spa centre and gym.

Hotel Vigo (☎ 43 282; www.hotel-vigo.com; ul Ivan Vazov 9; r Jul & Aug from 180 lv, s/d Sep–Jun from 60/90 lv; 🍷 🍷 🍷) Around 200m west of the old town on the way to South Beach, Vigo is a vast new complex with large, tastefully furnished rooms and top-class facilities including four pools, a spa centre, billiard room and gym.

Eating

It will come as no surprise to discover that all restaurants in Nesebăr are geared towards the passing tourist trade, and prices are roughly twice what you'll pay away from the coastal resorts. Freshly caught fish is, naturally, plentiful, and the cheapest places are the harbour-side cafés near the bus station.

Zlatna Diona (☎ 0878345001; off ul Ivan Vazov; mains 3-7 lv; 🍷 7am–midnight) Near the Hotel Crystal Beach, the 'Golden Dune' is a cheap and cheery restaurant offering better value than the beachfront places. The English menu features grilled fish, pasta, pizza, salads and soups and the usual Bulgarian specialities.

Bistro Flagman (harbourside; mains 6-12 lv; 🍷 lunch & dinner) One of several harbourside restaurants just outside the town walls offering a fish-heavy menu, though grilled chicken, pork steaks and salads are also available. It's a pleasant place to just sit back with a Burgasko beer or two on a hot day.

our pick Mehana Pri Shopite (☎ 0888061163; ul Neptun 12; mains 7-12 lv; 🍷 11am–midnight) Set in a traditional, tavern-style courtyard around a twisted, 300-year-old fig tree, this is a welcoming place with great food, including numerous kinds of freshly caught fish plus grills, steaks and some vegetarian options.

Old Nesebăr (☎ 0898833225; ul Ivan Alexander 11; mains 8-12 lv; 🍷 lunch & dinner) With two tiers of seating offering great sea views, this is a popular place for barbecues, grills and fish dishes. It also offers an unexpected menu of Mexican food, including reasonable stabs at fajitas and burritos.

Zlatnoto Runo (☎ 45 602; ul Rusalka 6; mains 8-20 lv; 🍷 lunch & dinner) Overlooking the sea on the southeastern end of the peninsula, the 'Golden Fleece' serves a varied menu, including roast lamb and rabbit plus some inventive seafood dishes, such as octopus with blueberry sauce and pumpkin stuffed with stewed mussels.

Restaurant Honolulu (☎ 45 505; ul Ivan Asen II 22; mains 10-20 lv; 🍷 9am–midnight) It's a long way from Waikiki Beach, but this sea-facing restaurant is a lively, sociable place to sample a range of fresh fish, including squid and octopus.

Drinking

Mona Lisa (☎ 0886677577; ul Mitropolitska; 🍷 9am–late) Facing Sveti Spas Church, this place has an outdoor terrace and a big menu of cocktails, and gets regularly packed out in the evenings.

Tequila Bar (🍷 noon–late) On a pontoon bobbing about off the northern side of the peninsula, this is an unusual, if slightly expensive, place for a drink. Open summer only.

Entertainment

There is a handful of clubs in the new town, including **Xtreme Club** (☎ 0897844867; ul Han Krum 11; 🍷 8am–late), while La Bomba, on South Beach, is a popular tourist haunt, offering regular live music and DJ parties during the summer. For livelier nightlife, head to nearby Sunny Beach (Slânchev Bryag). There's a summer-only **cinema** (☎ 445 714; ul Mesembria 20; tickets 5 lv), and free live music and dance performances regularly take place in the open-air theatre below St John Aliturgetos Church.

Shopping

Nesebăr can resemble one huge open-air market, with almost every street of the old town lined with hundreds of stalls selling all kinds

of tourist tat, from cheeky t-shirts and knock-off watches to embroideries, pottery and paintings. The range on offer is impressive, but price-wise it's far better to shop almost anywhere else. If you're after something a bit different, a few of the town's many churches now operate as more upmarket souvenir shops, open daylight hours in summer only.

Sveti Todor Church (ul Neptun) This tiny church now serves as an art gallery and souvenir shop, with a range of better-quality keepsakes such as contemporary paintings, prints and studio pottery.

Christ Pantokrator Church (ul Mesembria) This church has been converted into a commercial art gallery, selling the works of local painters, mainly seascapes and views of the old town.

Sveta Paraskeva Church (ul Hemus) Another art gallery conversion, with mostly modern paintings and the odd sculpture.

Getting There & Away

Nesebăr is excellently connected to destinations both up and down the coast by public transport, and the town's bus station is on the small square at the end of the causeway, just outside the city walls. The stop before this on the mainland is for the new town. From the bus station, there are buses to nearby Sunny Beach (0.80 lv, 10 minutes, every 15 minutes), Burgas (2.50 lv, 40 minutes, every 30 minutes), Varna (8 lv, two hours, seven daily) and Sofia (28 lv, seven hours, several daily).

To get to Sunny Beach, you can also jump on the trolleybus (2 lv) or water taxi (15 lv), which leaves from an obvious spot north of the bus station about every 20 minutes between 10am and 9pm.

SUNNY BEACH (SLÂNCHEV BRYAG) СЛЪНЧЕВ БРЯГ

☎ 0554

Bulgaria's biggest and brassiest seaside resort, the naff-sounding Sunny Beach is the Black Sea coast's hyperactive answer to the Spanish *costas*, with several kilometres of sandy beach that attracts more international sun worshippers than any other resort in the country. The beach is one of Bulgaria's finest, with every imaginable activity from minigolf to parasailing, and multilingual restaurants and pubs abound. If you're just looking for a dependable, no-worries resort to top up your tan, this is the place to come. You won't even notice that you're in a country called Bulgaria.

Sunny Beach can feel a bit insular and few people stir from the sun beds to go any further than nearby Nesebăr, but public transport connections are good if you want to explore. This is probably the most expensive place in Bulgaria, so a holiday here might not be the bargain break you envisioned: bottles of water cost as much as 3 lv on the beachfront, and restaurant prices are close to what you'd pay in Western Europe.

Orientation & Information

The main thoroughfare of Sunny Beach is the busy Varna–Burgas coastal road. Along this road, there are plentiful ATMs, market stalls, a post office, a telephone centre with an internet agency and travel agencies. Dozens of foreign exchange offices are set up here and elsewhere around the resort. Day-old copies of English, German and Swedish newspapers are sold at bookstalls.

Activities

Organised watery fun is on hand at **Aqua Paradise** (☎ 51 543; www.aquaparadise-bg.com; adult/child all day 28/16 lv, 3-7pm 20/10 lv; 🍷 10am-7pm), a huge new water park on the southern outskirts of the resort with a variety of pools, slides and chutes. A free minibus, running every 15 minutes, makes pick-ups at 10 signed stops around Sunny Beach. The smaller **Action Aquapark** (☎ 26 235; www.aquapark.bg; adult/child 26/14 lv; 🍷 10am-7pm), on the western side of Sunny Beach, offers a similar setup. Numerous water sports are available on the beach, such as **parasailing** (solo/tandem 45/80 lv), **banana boats** (per person 10 lv) and **jet-skiing** (15 min about 50 lv), as well as a range of other rather expensive diversions, including **bungee trampolines** (25 lv) and **minigolf** (per game 10 lv). In summer, weekly **shows** (tickets 25 lv) of folk music, dancing and acrobatics take place in the Hotel Majestic at the far northern end of the beach. Tickets are sold at the door.

Tours

There are several agencies on the main road near the bus station, all offering a similar range of excursions such as **yacht cruises** (57 lv), **wine-tasting trips** (65 lv), day trips to Edirne, Turkey (50 lv) and two-day trips to Istanbul (139 lv).

Sleeping

Sunny Beach is essentially a package holiday resort, so almost everyone staying here will

be on a prebooked, often all-inclusive deal arranged in their home countries. Of all the coastal resorts, this is the least user-friendly for independent travellers, so if you really want to stay here, it's best to book through an agent at home. There are a few travel agencies that can book hotel rooms, but rates vary wildly. Most hotels charge an additional 'resort fee' of about €6 to €7 per person per stay.

Sunny Express (☎ 24 570; sunny-vt@abv.bg; bus station; s/d from around 50/60 lv) Helpful agency at the bus station that can book rooms at various prices in many of the resort's hotels; the cheapest will be two-star hotels, some way from the beach.

Hotel Globus (☎ 22 018; s/d incl half-board Jul & Aug €72/106; (P) (☎) (🚰) (🚰)) Big seafront hotel in the centre of Sunny Beach offering large, bright rooms and lots of on-site diversions, including indoor and outdoor pools, a gym and spa. Prices drop by more than 50% outside high season.

Victoria Palace Hotel (☎ 25 490; www.victoria-group.net; s/d Jul & Aug 220/250 lv, Sep-Jun from 80/100 lv; (P) (☎) (🚰) (🚰)) Colossal beachfront hotel offering every imaginable amenity, including a spa. The garish public areas appear to be following an eccentric 'Louis XIV on Safari' theme, but the large rooms have been furnished in simple style. Offers good value out of season.

Eating

Restaurants in Sunny Beach are among the most expensive in Bulgaria. There are numerous food stalls along the beachfront where you can pick up a soggy slice of pizza for 2 lv or a burger for 5 lv, and the place is packed with restaurants, most of which employ touts to hassle passers-by. Annoyingly, even normally uniform chains such as McDonald's and Happy Bar & Grill charge two to three times more than at their branches elsewhere.

Fat Cat (mains around 10-20 lv; ☎ 24hr) On the beachfront facing the Glarus Hotel, this is a typically boisterous restaurant and pub aimed particularly at British tourists, with a menu of pizzas, steaks, pies and curries, and big screens showing Sky Sports. There's a 20% discount between 5pm and 7pm.

Chilli Peppers (pedestrian thoroughfare near Hotel Kuban; mains around 12-30 lv; ☎ 8.30am-midnight) Popular 'Wild West Barbecue' joint serving up lots of steaks, sausages and grills in a mocked-up ranch-style setting.

Steakhouse Watermill (mains from 12 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) On the beach just past the Neptun Beach Hotel, this place specialises, naturally enough, in steaks, with sirloin, T-bone and gammon steaks dominating the menu alongside more traditional Bulgarian grills.

Getting There & Away

The central bus station is just off the main road. City buses to Burgas (2.50 lv, 45 minutes, roughly every 30 minutes in summer) all go via Nesebâr; you can also get frequent buses to Varna (8 lv, two hours, every 30 minutes), Pomorie (1.80 lv, 30 minutes) and Sveti Vlas (0.90 lv, 30 minutes).

Most buses and minibuses use the station just off the main road, about 100m up from the Hotel Svejest. Minibuses from Burgas stop along the main road outside the station. From the bus station, buses depart roughly every hour for Sofia (28 lv, seven hours), and there are several daily services to Plovdiv and Stara Zagora.

Getting Around

Trolleybuses (2 lv) shuttle along three numbered routes every 15 to 20 minutes between 9am and 11pm. The streets around the resort are uncrowded and flat, so scooters are an ideal way of getting around. These can be rented from stalls along the beach (20 lv per hour). There are a number of car rental agencies on the main road, including **Sunny Trans** (☎ 71 082) opposite the Mariner Hotel; rates, including insurance and unlimited kilometres, start at €30 per day.

SVETI VLAS СВЕТИ ВЛАС

☎ 0554 / pop 3000

Just 5km north of Sunny Beach (Slânchev Bryag), Sveti Vlas is one of the latest holiday resort developments on the Black Sea coast. Originally settled by the Thracians, who called it Larisa, it was renamed in honour of the patron saint of cattle farmers in the 14th century, but there are few obvious signs of its history today. Instead, everywhere you look, a new multistorey hotel or apartment complex is shooting up, and in 2007 Bulgaria's first private marina, with space for 300 yachts, was completed here, along with an upmarket hotel and restaurant complex. The marina also has a new border checkpoint, making Sveti Vlas an international gateway to Bulgaria.

The 'centre' of Sveti Vlas, such as it is, revolves around the bus stop, around 250m or so uphill from the beach. Here you'll find a post office, bank and several cheap restaurants and snack bars, but little else. The main road, ul Tsar Simeon, is lined with cafés, small shops and several internet centres.

The narrow curve of sandy **beach** isn't the best the Black Sea has to offer, but compared with Sunny Beach it's mercifully uncrowded (for now). The water is shallow and there are some water sports available, including **jet-skiing** (10 mins 40lv). The beach is bisected by the snazzy new marina complex, which encompasses a row of upscale restaurants, bars and shops.

Sleeping & Eating

Kometa-2 (☎ 68 112; www.kometa2.com; ul Vasil Levski 3; r per person 17-20 lv) Helpful but non-English-speaking agency near the bus stop that can arrange private rooms in town, as well as excursions and car rental.

Hotel Laguna (☎ 69 016; r/apt incl breakfast Jul & Aug 90/138 lv, Sep-Jun from 57/80 lv; ☎) (🚰) Halfway down the unnamed lane between the bus stop and the beach, the Laguna is a decent option, though some of the apartments are a bit kitschy, with four-poster beds and gaudy artwork.

Hotel Berlin (☎ 68 875; www.hotelberlin-bg.com; r incl breakfast Jul & Aug 110 lv, s/d incl breakfast Sep-Jun from 38/50 lv; ☎) (🚰) Set back from the beach, Berlin is a sparkling new hotel with bland but large rooms, all offering sea views.

Hotel Palace Marina Dinevi (☎ 33 333; s/d/apt incl breakfast €150/160/360; (P) (☎) (🚰) (🚰)) Part of the new marina complex, this five-star hotel is the top place to stay, with large, luxurious rooms and all the top-end facilities you'd expect for this price.

Café Teya (ul Tsar Simeon; mains 4-5 lv; ☎) breakfast, lunch & dinner) Close to the bus stop, this is one of several similar places to grab a quick bite to eat, with pizzas, omelettes and grills on the menu. It's good value for Sveti Vlas.

Old Mill (☎ 0885546326; Marina Dinevi; mains from 10 lv; ☎) lunch & dinner) At the other end of the scale, Old Mill offers a classy menu featuring dishes such as pork with fig sauce and lots of fresh fish.

Getting There & Away

In summer, there are frequent buses from Sunny Beach (Slânchev Bryag; 0.90 lv, 25 minutes, every 30 minutes) running between

6.45am and midnight. Buses make a circuitous route, with a number of stops around the resort before reaching the central square. Also in summer, there are two daily services from Sofia (28 lv, eight hours), while from the marina, boats go to Nesebâr (15 lv, 20 minutes) hourly between 9am and 8pm.

NORTHERN COAST

VARNA BAPHA

☎ 052 / pop 330,000

Bulgaria's third city and maritime capital, Varna is by far the most interesting and cosmopolitan town on the Black Sea coast, and a definite highlight of the region. A strange yet harmonious combination of port city, naval base and seaside resort, it's an appealing place to while away a few days, packed with history yet thoroughly modern, with an enormous park to amble round and a lengthy beach to lounge on. One of the most dynamic and fast-growing Bulgarian cities, it has experienced a property boom in recent years and there's a definite air of affluent swagger about the place. In the city centre you'll find Bulgaria's largest Roman baths complex and its best archaeological museum, as well as a lively cultural and restaurant scene – while every other shop-front now seems to be an estate agent touting holiday homes to British visitors.

Away from the capitalist crush, Varna has a number of less obvious attractions, including several art galleries, a dolphinarium and Bulgaria's only naval museum, while the city also makes an ideal base for day trips to nearby beach resorts such as Sveti Konstantin (p246) and Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasâtsi; p247), and the charming towns of Balchik (p251) and Dobrich (p277). For information on local wineries, see p66.

Horror fans will no doubt remember that it was from Varna that Bram Stoker's *Dracula* set sail on the *Demeter*, bound for Whitby and a date with Mina Harker.

History

Remnants of an ancient Thracian civilisation dating to about 4000 BC have been found at Varna Necropolis, an area of about 100 tombs near Varna. In 585 BC, Greeks from Miletus settled in the area, founding the city of Odessos, which thrived as a major commercial centre until falling to Alexander



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Balkan Tourism..... 1 C2				Prestol..... 46 D2	
Biochim Commercial Bank..... (see 4)		Varna Centre for Contemporary Art..... 22 C1		Pri Monahinite..... 47 C3	
Frag..... (see 60)		Varna City Art Gallery..... 23 C1		Pri Yafata..... (see 24)	
Internet Doom..... 2 B2				Tambuktu..... 48 D2	
Laundrette..... 3 C1				Trops Kásheta..... 49 C2	
Main Post Office..... 4 A1		SLEEPING			
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Penguin Bookshop..... 6 A2		Cherno More Hotel..... 24 C2		A-Lounge Beach..... 50 C4	
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		Hotel Astra..... 29 C1		Copacabana..... 53 D2	
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		Hotel Odessos..... 32 C2		Mustang Cinema..... 56 A2	
		Hotel Relax..... 33 C2		Open-Air Theatre..... 57 D2	
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		Panorama Hotel..... 35 C3		Summer Theatre..... 59 D2	
		Three Dolphins Hotel..... 36 B3		Varna Opera House..... 60 A2	
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		Voennomorski Club..... 38 A2		Blaga Blagoeva..... 61 A1	
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		Dom Na Arkitekta..... 40 B2		TRANSPORT	
		Happy Bar & Grill..... 41 C2		Rila Bureau..... 64 B3	
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		Happy Bar & Grill..... 43 A2			
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		St Anastasios Orthodox Church..... 18 C3			
		St Michael the Archangel Church..... 19 C2			
		St Nikolai Church..... 20 B2			

from the train station into pl Nezavisimost. From this square, a short thoroughfare heads northwest, passing the domineering cathedral that towers over the market and several theatres, and turns into bul Vladislav Varenchik, which leads to the main bus station and airport. From pl Nezavisimost, another broad pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Boris I, runs east and then northeast towards Primorski Park and the sea.

MAPS

A excellent free tourist map of the city is widely available at hotels and restaurants; if you find yourself wanting more detail, you can buy the *Varna* map (1:10,000), published by Domino in English (with a red cover), from any of the bookstalls found throughout the city and at the bus and train stations. Handily, it also includes smaller maps of Albena, Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) and Sveti Konstantin.

Information BOOKSHOPS

Penguin Bookshop ☎ 623 380; pl Mitropolitska Simeon; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6.30pm Sat & Sun) Stocks English-language novels and books on Bulgarian history, culture, cuisine and language.

INTERNET ACCESS

Frag (pl Nezavisimost; per hr 2 lv) Subterranean internet café in the same building as the Varna Opera House.
Internet Doom (ul 27 Yuli 13; per hr 2 lv) The most central of several branches around town, just behind the St Nikolai Church.

LAUNDRY

Laundrette (ul Opalchenska 23; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) Offers a drop-and-collect service at very reasonable rates.

MEDIA

Varna City Info Guide Free quarterly glossy booklet, available at some hotel reception desks, with useful general information on the city and region, plus hotel, restaurant and club reviews. It also includes a handy tourist map.

MONEY

There are numerous foreign exchange offices and ATMs around the city centre.
Biochim Commercial Bank (bul Vladislav Varenchik) Near the main post office. Changes travellers cheques, provides cash advances and has an ATM.
Unicredit Bulbank (bul Slivnitsa) Changes travellers cheques, provides cash advances over the counter and has an ATM that accepts major credit cards.
United Bulgarian Bank (ul Knyaz Boris I)

POST

Main post office (ul Sáborni 36)

the Great. The city didn't really regain any regional importance until the Romans conquered the area and set up a base in Odessos during the 2nd century AD.

Ransacked by the invading Avars in AD 586, the city recovered under the Byzantines as a key port city, and gained its modern name of Varna (possibly derived from the word for 'water') during the period of the First Bulgarian Empire (681-1018). It alternated between Byzantine and Bulgarian rule during the Middle Ages, and was captured by the Turks in 1393 and turned into a northern bastion of their empire. It was used by British troops as a port during the Crimean War (1853-56), after which Turkey allowed its allies Britain and France to sell

their products throughout the Ottoman Empire, making Varna a great trading centre once more.

In 1866, a railway between Ruse and Varna was built, providing a direct route from the Danube to the Black Sea coast, and Varna became a major shipbuilding centre and port. In 1921, Varna was established as Bulgaria's first seaside holiday resort, and its status as the country's summertime playground was enhanced by the founding of the International Festival (see p242) in 1926, which has been going strong ever since.

Orientation

Despite its size, the centre of Varna is pleasingly compact. Ulitsa Tsar Simeon I leads

TELEPHONE

Telephone centre (ul Sáborni 36; ☎ 7am-11pm) Inside the main post office.

TOURIST INFORMATION

Municipal Tourist Information Centre (☎ 654 518; off ul Knyaz Boris I; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri) Glass cabin set up in the middle of the street, offering a few free brochures and maps and booklets for sale.

TRAVEL AGENCIES

Balkan Tourism (☎ 618 051; www.balkantourism.bg; ul A Malinov 4) Can organise private accommodation and rental cars and book excursions.

Tourist Service (☎ 612 225; Cherno More Hotel, bul Slivnitsa 33; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 2pm Sat) Rents cars and organises excursions and private rooms.

Dangers & Annoyances

Like elsewhere along the coast, some taxi drivers are prone to ripping off foreign visitors at the bus and train stations, so check the tariffs before getting in or, better still, pick up a cab on the streets away from these places, which are more likely to use their meters. Pickpockets abound, so be wary in crowded areas such as the market behind the Opera House. Varna appears to be the last refuge in Bulgaria for black-market money changers, who lurk around pl Nezavisimost. Needless to say, it's illegal to change money on the street and you're sure to end up out of pocket, so don't do it!

Sights**CATHEDRAL OF THE ASSUMPTION OF THE VIRGIN**

Standing a block north of pl Nezavisimost, this large **cathedral** (☎ 225 435; pl Mitropolitiska Simeon; ☎ 6am-10pm) was built between 1880 and 1886 by the architect Gencho Kunev, in celebration of the country's recent independence from Ottoman rule. Topped with golden onion domes, which alleviate the sombre, blocky appearance of its main body, the church is a much-cherished symbol of the city, second in size only to the Aleksander Nevski Memorial Church (p91) in Sofia. Note the murals (painted in 1950), colourful stained-glass windows and intricately carved bishop's throne.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The best of its kind in Bulgaria, Varna's fascinating **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 681 011; ul Maria

Luisa 41; adult/child 8/2 lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Nov-Mar) is a huge place, displaying some 100,000 objects in 39 rooms. All exhibits originate from the Varna area and are placed in chronological order, starting off with pottery and flint tools from the now-submerged Mesolithic settlements around Varna Lake.

The highlights are the 6500-year-old bangles, necklaces and earrings unearthed at the Varna Necropolis (closed to the public), about 4km west of the city, representing what is said to be the oldest worked gold found anywhere in the world. Other rooms contain Thracian jewellery, Roman-era surgical implements and Hellenistic tombstones and statues, as well as touching oddments such as a marble plaque listing, in Greek, the names of all the city's school graduates for AD 221.

Upstairs are several galleries full of religious icons dating back to the 14th century and a comprehensive collection of coins.

ROMAN THERMAE

One unmissable sight in Varna is the well-preserved ruins of the **Roman Thermae** (☎ 681 030; ul Khan Krum; adult/child 4/2 lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar). The ruins are the largest in Bulgaria and the third biggest in Europe, although only a small part of the original complex (estimated to have been 7000 sq metres) still stands. The baths date from the late 2nd century AD and were probably abandoned only 100 years later.

There is no information inside the complex other than signs indicating the name of each room. You can also peer into the furnace, where slaves kept the whole thing operating.

ROMAN BATHS

The ruins described previously are termed the Roman *thermae* (Latin for 'baths') to distinguish them from the **Roman Baths** (bul Primorski), another, much smaller ablutions complex, built around the 4th century AD. There's nothing much to see other than some foundation walls, and no explanations are posted on the litter-filled site. The grounds are closed, but you can lean over the fence for a quick look.

CHURCHES

The beautiful **St Anastasios Orthodox Church** (ul Graf Ignatiev) overlooks the Roman Thermae. Built in 1602, it's one of the oldest churches

ROMAN BATHING

Like all self-respecting Roman cities, Odessos was graced with the very best public bathing facilities, and the vast *thermae* here were a visible, powerful symbol of the fruits – and engineering skill – of Roman civilisation. Far from being simply a place to wash up, the baths were an integral part of civic life. They were a place to socialise, make business deals, eavesdrop on the latest gossip, snooze, read, eat and pick up male prostitutes. All classes were allowed, though men and women were admitted at different times. Larger baths, such as the one in Odessos, had a *palaestra*, or exercise hall, where wrestling and other athletic activities took place, often accompanied by music. Bathers would then rub themselves down with oil and sweat for a while in the *sudatorium* (a kind of sauna) before scraping it off with a strigil, examples of which are on show in the Archaeological Museum (opposite). A plunge in the hot water of the *caldarium* would follow. They would then move on to the more bearable temperature of the *tepidarium*, finishing off with a dip in the icy *frigidarium*. The remains of these shallow pools can still be seen in Varna's Thermae, as well as the furnace and hypocaust system that provided underfloor heating and hot water.

in the city and features an intricately carved bishop's throne.

The quaint **St Nikolai Church** (ul Knyaz Boris I), which seems stranded along the modern mall, is worth a visit for its murals. It's always busy, and is a popular venue for weddings.

The elegant **St Sarkis Armenian Apostolic Church** (ul Han Asparuh 15) was built in 1842 and features a barrelled wooden ceiling and a wonderful collection of naive icons. It's normally closed, but the custodian will be happy to open it up for you if he's around.

St Michael the Archangel Church (ul 27 Yulii) was founded in 1865 and is historically significant as the first place where religious services were given in Bulgarian. The building also contained Varna's first school. The church is small and badly lit but there are some fine wooden icons.

ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM

Housed in a delightful revival-era mansion built in 1860, Varna's **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 630 588; ul Panagyurishte 22; adult/student 4/2 lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Nov-Mar) is one of the country's best. The ground floor contains a collection of agricultural implements and displays about weaving, wine-making and fishing from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The 1st floor has an impressive range of costumes and jewellery, and the four rooms on the 2nd floor are furnished in period style.

HISTORY MUSEUM

Watching over the ruins of the Roman baths, Varna's ivy-covered **History Museum** (☎ 632 677; ul 8 Noemvri 3; adult/child 4/2 lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun) is itself an intriguing part of the city's his-

tory. Built in 1851 as the Belgian Embassy, it subsequently became a hotel, a prison and, under the communists, a Museum of the Revolution, before taking on its present role in 1990. Displays on the ground floor include photographs of the city from the 1920s, while the basement holds an exhibition on local trades and handicrafts such as printing, weaving and brewing. More imagination has gone into the replicas of long-gone 1920s and '30s shops and offices on the 1st floor, including 'Uncle Mityu's Café', a hat shop, toy shop and lawyer's office. There's also a replica of a bedroom from the Hotel London (now the Grand Hotel Musala Palace).

NATIONAL NAVAL MUSEUM

The only one of its kind in Bulgaria, the **National Naval Museum** (☎ 632 018; bul Primorski 2; adult/child 2/1 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Sat) offers an introduction to the country's seagoing history from the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78) to the present day. Embedded in concrete outside the museum entrance is the **warship Druzki** (admission 1 lv; ☎ 11am-5pm Tue, Thu & Sat), which torpedoed a Turkish cruiser during the First Balkan War in 1912. It's possible to clamber around this revered relic (ask the museum staff to open the gate). Inside the musty museum building itself is a collection of uniforms, model ships, naval insignia and displays on the *Druzki*, including an enormous torpedo, although there's little labelling in English. Anchors, artillery and helicopters can be seen rusting quietly in the grounds, while encased in glass is the yacht *Cor Coroli*, in which Georgi Georgiev became the first Bulgarian to sail single-handed around the world, in 1977.

PRIMORSKI PARK

Established in 1878, this large and attractive green space overlooking the sea stretches for about 8km, and is said to be the largest of its kind in Europe. It's full of promenading families and old ladies knitting lace in summer, and there's always something going on.

Further into the park is the **Aquarium** (☎ 222 586; adult/child 2/1 lv, foreign-language lecture 24 lv; ☎ 9am-8pm). Housed in a powder-blue Art Deco building, it's an old-fashioned place with tanks filled with seahorses, piranhas and conger eels as well as some denizens of the Black Sea's depths. There's also a collection of seashells but there's no English labelling.

In the northern section, the **Zoopark** (☎ 302 528; adult/child 1/0.70 lv; ☎ 8am-8pm) is a dispiriting place featuring a range of animals, including lions, wolves, monkeys, goats and a camel, all in small concrete enclosures. There's also a solitary bear and birds kept in filthy cages. About 200m further north, the **Terrarium Varna** (☎ 302 571; adult/child 2/1.50 lv; ☎ 9am-10pm) has a collection of creepy crawlies such as spiders and scorpions.

Another 500m further north is the ugly concrete **Dolphinarium** (☎ 302 199; adult/child 20/14 lv; ☎ Tue-Sun). Apparently the only one of its kind in the Balkan regions, it presents 45-minute shows (at 10.30am, noon and 3.30pm) of dolphins performing various acrobatic tricks.

BEACH

Steps from Primorski Park lead down to the city's long, sandy beach, which is hugely popular with local sunbathers, paddlers and beach volleyball players. There are also a couple of tiny, outdoor, steaming **mineral-water pools**, although these are more popular with rheumatic pensioners than with the beachgoing set. The main attraction, though, is the long coastal lane, officially known as aleya Georgi Georgiev but more commonly referred to either as Plazhna aleya or **Kraybrezhna aleya**, which is the name we've used here. In summer, it's the centre of Varna's nightlife, lined with clubs, bars and restaurants – only a handful of which operate at other times of the year; many also change names from one season to the next. Pick up the *Summer Seaside Guide* (p213) to see what's new.

ART GALLERIES

Varna City Art Gallery (☎ 243 141; ul Lyuben Karavelov 1; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun), also known as the Boris Georgiev Art Gallery, features two floors of 19th- and 20th-century Bulgarian art, including works by Vladimir Dimitrov and David Peretz. It also hosts temporary exhibitions such as the International Print Biennial (odd-numbered years).

The **Varna Centre for Contemporary Art** (☎ 603 238; ul Knyaz Boris I 65; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is another gallery with a collection of idiosyncratic modern art.

Artin (☎ 614 833; ul Knyaz Boris I 57; ☎ 9.30am-7pm Mon-Fri) is an equally interesting private gallery in a charming old mansion nearby, which shows the latest work of some of the best-known local artists.

Festivals & Events

Between May and October, Varna hosts the renowned **Varna Summer International Festival** (www.varnasummerfest.org). Established in 1926, the festival features outstanding events, including opera, the biennial International Ballet Competition (held in even-numbered years) and choral, jazz and folk music. Events are held at the **Open-Air Theatre** (☎ 228 385; Primorski Park) and in some of the nine halls in the massive **Festival Hall** (☎ 621 331; ul Slivnitsa). Programmes and information about buying tickets are well advertised beforehand in Varna and Sofia. The Festival Hall also hosts the **Annual International Film Festival** in late August and early September.

Other special events around the city include the **Songs about Varna Competition** and the **Days of Greek Culture Festival**, both held in March.

Sleeping

Varna certainly has no shortage of accommodation, although the better (or at least, the more central) places get very busy during the summer months. Several new midrange hotels have appeared in recent years, and Varna is still the only place on the coast where you'll find backpacker hostels.

BUDGET

Private rooms are plentiful in Varna, and pensioners with spare rooms wait around the train station to greet new arrivals. Prices tend to be around 12 lv per person, but make sure you don't end up in some out-of-the-way suburb. **Isak** (☎ 602 318; www.accommodatebg.com; train station; r

per person 12-14 lv; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Sat, to 6pm Sun) and **Astra Tour** (☎ 605 861; train station; r per person from 12 lv, apt from 35 lv; ☎ 7am-9pm Mon-Fri, to 7pm Sat & Sun), neighbouring agencies inside the train station, offer private rooms around town.

Flag Hostel (☎ 0897408115; www.varnahostel.com; 1st fl, ul Sheinovo 2; dm incl breakfast €10) Varna's most central hostel, located on a side street just off bul Knyaz Boris I. It's a friendly place with a young, international party atmosphere and three six-bed dorms, modern bathrooms and kitchen facilities.

Yo Ho Hostel (☎ 0887601691, 0887933340; www.yohohostel.com; ul Ruse 23; dm/s/d incl breakfast €11/14/14; ☎) Shiver your timbers at this pirate-themed place found just down the street from the opera house, in a brand-new location with four dorm rooms, two doubles and one single room. Free internet, breakfast and pickups are offered, and the management also organises day trips.

Voennomorski Club (☎ 617 965; bul Vladislav Varenchik 2; s with fan 21 lv, s/d with air-con 31/42 lv; ☎) The 'Naval Club' is a pale blue building facing the cathedral, offering small but comfy rooms. However, it's an old-fashioned place, with unsmiling, monosyllabic reception staff and dated furnishings, giving it a kind of retro, Warsaw Pact atmosphere. Still, the location's good and it's a bargain.

Victorina (☎ 603 541; ul Tsar Simeon I 36; r per person 22 lv) Right by the train station and highly recommended for renting good-quality rooms in private houses around the centre.

MIDRANGE

Hotel Astra (☎ 630 524; ul Opalchenska 9; s/d 40/60 lv; ☎) Not far from the centre, the Astra is a cheery family hotel with a collection of simple but perfectly clean and cosy rooms that are a bargain by Varna standards.

Three Dolphins Hotel (☎ 600 911; three_dolphins@abv.bg; ul Gabrovo 27; s/d 42/51 lv, renovated 51/60 lv; ☎) On a quiet side street near the train station, this small, homely guesthouse offers fair value. All rooms have a TV, though only the renovated ones come with air-conditioning and fridges.

Cherno More Hotel (☎ 612 235; www.chernomorebg.com; bul Slivnitsa 33; s/d unrenovated 45/56 lv, r renovated from 80 lv; ☎) This gigantic, socialist-era eyesore in the city centre may not look so enticing, with its tacky 'casino' sign and dark and strangely bare foyer, but the newly renovated rooms are bright, clean and smartly furnished,

all with balconies offering bird's-eye views of Varna. Staff are friendly and helpful. Breakfast is included.

Hotel Antik (☎ 632 157; www.galia-online.com/antik; ul Ohrid 10; s/d with fan 50/58 lv, d/ste with air-con 68/90 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) A neat, family-run hotel just down the road from pl Nezavisimost. The 18 rooms are simple but clean; all come with TVs and minibars, and many have balconies.

Hotel Elegance (☎ 631 657; www.elegance-hotel.com; ul Gabrovo 24; s/d/apt incl breakfast €30/50/70; ☎) Close to the train station, this relatively new place is a little pricey, though rooms are large and the apartments come with saunas. Watch out for the huge mirror just inside the entrance.

City Mark (☎ 655 546; www.citymark-hotel.com; pl Nezavisimost; s/d/apt 59/79/140 lv; ☎) Right in the pedestrianised heart of the city, City Mark is an attractive, modern option with some fair-sized rooms, though the scarlet-and-silver décor scheme can be a bit overwhelming. It's a small and popular place, so advance bookings are recommended.

Hotel Relax (☎ 607 847; www.hotelrelax1.com; ul Stefan Karadzha 22; r 60 lv; ☎ ☎) Centrally located hotel just off bul Slivnitsa, with a small collection of homely rooms of differing sizes, all with fridges, TV and modern bathrooms. There's an odd setup, however, with a rival hotel in the same courtyard, which has been known to poach or turn away guests looking for the original. Don't be sidetracked – the reception for Hotel Relax is located at the very back of the courtyard.

TOP END

Hotel Odessos (☎ 640 300; www.odessos-bg.com; bul Slivnitsa 1; s/d with fan 85/106 lv, with air-con 110/125 lv; ☎ ☎) Enjoying the best location of any hotel in town, opposite the entrance to Primorski Park, the Odessos is an older establishment with smallish and rather average rooms for the price, but it's convenient for the beach and for sightseeing. Only the pricier 'sea view' rooms have balconies, but the cheaper 'city view' rooms are much quieter. Breakfast is included.

Panorama Hotel (☎ 687 300; www.panoramabg.com; bul Primorski 31; s/d/ste from 110/170/230 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) The location on a grubby and busy main road isn't ideal, but inside this is a chic, modern hotel with good facilities including a gym and sauna, and many of the large rooms have panoramic sea views.

Hotel Capitol (☎ 688 000; www.capitol.bg; ul Petko Karavelov 40; s/d/apt €75/85/115; P ♿ ♻️) Stylish, friendly and located in a quiet part of town, the four-star Capitol is among the best in its price range, with a choice of good-sized rooms done out in a muted pink-and-cream décor scheme. Apartments have both shower and bath.

Grand Hotel Musala Palace (☎ 664 100; www.musala.palace.bg; ul Musala 3; s/d/ste incl breakfast from €150/170/205; P ♿ ♻️) Varna's grandest and oldest hotel is this superb conversion of the Hotel London, which originally opened in 1912. There's a touch of rococo gaudiness about the public areas, but rooms are spacious and elegantly furnished, and the overall service is top-notch.

Eating

Trops Kasha (ul Knyaz Boris I; mains 3-4 lv; ☎ 8.30am-10.30pm) This branch of the dependable nationwide self-service canteen chain is the ideal place for cheap, simple food such as sausage and beans, chicken chops and moussaka; just point at whatever takes your fancy.

Prestol (☎ 600 807; Kraybrezhna aleya; mains 3-8 lv; ☎ 10am-1am) Busy place on the seaside promenade serving cheap grills and salads in an attractive beachfront setting. Pork skewers and fish are on the menu, along with 'sausage by the metre' for the very hungry.

Orient Turkish Restaurant (☎ 602 380; ul Tsaribrod 1; mains 4-5 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) Another of Varna's best, this halal place serves up delicious Turkish and Middle Eastern dishes such as shish kebabs, tabouleh and stuffed vine leaves. Despite being on a busy road, the outdoor terrace is pleasantly shielded from the traffic by some bushes.

Dom na Arkitekta (ul Musala 10; mains 4-8 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) 'The Architect's House' is a fine old wooden National Revival-style building with a private, leafy courtyard popular with local cats. The usual grills, steaks and salads are on the menu and it's a restful place for a cold beer or two.

Morsko Konche (☎ 600 418; pl Nezavisimost; mains 4-10 lv; ☎ 8am-11.30pm) The 'Seahorse' is a cheap and cheerful pizza place with a big menu featuring all the standard varieties, as well as some inventive creations of its own: the 'exotic' pizza comes with bananas and blueberries.

Pri Yafata (☎ 609 914; Cherno More Hotel, bul Slivnitsa 33; mains 4-10 lv; ☎ noon-midnight) Folksy place

offering good quality traditional Bulgarian cuisine, with dishes such as stewed pork knuckle, chicken *kavarma* and lots of salads and soups. There's live music every night.

Happy Bar & Grill (☎ 606 338; pl Nezavisimost; mains 5-10 lv; ☎ 8am-2am) Varna's home-grown, and now nationwide, chain restaurant has four branches around the city, including at this central location. The uncomplicated menu of grills, steaks and salads pulls in customers throughout the day, and the friendly waitstaff, who occasionally launch into spontaneous dance routines, certainly add to the atmosphere. There's another branch on bul Slivnitsa.

our pick Pri Monahinite (☎ 611 830; bul Primorski 47; mains 8-14 lv; ☎ 11am-midnight) Set in the courtyard of a little church, Pri Monahinite ('At the Nuns' Place') is a classy place for roast lamb, grilled pork and other meaty offerings. It also does good salads and has an extensive wine list.

Tambuktu (☎ 610 864; Kraybrezhna aleya; mains 8-20 lv; ☎ 9am-2am) One of the few restaurants along the seaside promenade that stay open year-round, Tambuktu is a chain seafood restaurant, serving up a vast assortment of freshly caught fish. Sea bass, lobster, prawns and many other dishes are on the menu, and there's live music in the evenings.

Mr Baba (☎ 614 629; off bul Primorski; mains 12-30 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) The coast-long trend for novelty ship restaurants has come to Varna, with this wooden-hulled venture stranded at the end of the beach, near the port. Named after a 17th-century Ottoman admiral, it features a pricey but hearty menu of fish and steak dishes such as sea bass, trout and bluefish.

Drinking

Some of the trendiest bars are found along the beach on Kraybrezhna aleya, although most only have a brief existence in the summer sunshine and many change names from one year to the next. There are also several cafés in Primorski Park, near the entrance to the Aquarium and around the Summer Theatre. In the city centre, ul Knyaz Boris I and bul Slivnitsa are home to smarter cocktail and coffee bars.

O'Neill's Irish Pub (☎ 614 586; Cherno More Hotel, bul Slivnitsa 33; ☎ 5pm-3am) Downstairs in the vast Cherno More Hotel complex, this Irish-themed pub offers regular live music and Sky Sports coverage to go with your Guinness. It also serves food.

A-Lounge Beach (☎ 0885190180; Kraybrezhna aleya; ☎ 9pm-3am) Swanky, summer-only beachfront bar offering live music, DJs, beach-party nights and, apparently, fashion shows. It even has a few small pools to loll around in with a cocktail in hand.

Entertainment

Varna Opera House (☎ 223 038; www.operavarna.bg; pl Nezavisimost) Bulgaria's second-most important opera house (after Sofia's) hosts performances by the Varna Opera and Philharmonic Orchestra all year except July and August.

Stoyan Bachvarov Dramatic Theatre (☎ 615 301; pl Nezavisimost 1) This theatre, located next door to the Opera House, stages dramatic plays from September through June.

Open-Air Theatre (☎ 612 803; Primorski Park) Complete with mock ivy-covered Roman arches, this theatre hosts everything from ballet to rock concerts. Details are available at the adjoining ticket office. Live music is also played most summer evenings at the temporary **Summer Theatre** (Primorski Park).

Mustang Cinema (☎ 610 333; ul Bratya Shkorpil 33; tickets 4-5 lv) and **Bulgaran Cinema** (☎ 0899333477; bul Maria Luisa 1; tickets 4-5 lv) are two of the more central places showing recent Hollywood movies.

Exit (☎ 645 050; ☎ 10pm-6am), **4aspik** (☎ 0885 800297; ☎ 10pm-6am), specialising in Bulgarian folk-pop, and **Copacabana** (☎ 0888281431; ☎ 9pm-4am), with a fondness for '70s and '80s music, are just a few of the many summertime clubs along Kraybrezhna aleya.

Shopping

The pedestrian stretch of ul Knyaz Boris I has numerous small fashion boutiques, including some international chains. Reproduction icons and paintings by local artists are sold outside the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin and St Nikolai Church, while there's a daily market in the park behind the Opera House, selling fruit and vegetables, books, souvenirs and clothes.

Capricorn Gallery (☎ 612 797; ul Sv Kliment Ohridski 1; ☎ 10.30am-7pm) Just off pl Ekzarh Yosif, this interesting little gallery sells paintings and sculptures by local artists, though prices are quite high.

Blaga Blagoeva (☎ 600 613; www.blaga-blagoeva.com; bul Vladislav Varenchik 34; ☎ 10am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10.30am-5.30pm Sun) Eponymous store selling the latest offerings from the highly regarded

local women's fashion designer, including colourful evening dresses and knitwear.

Valentina (pl Nezavisimost; ☎ 10am-8pm Mon-Sat, to 7pm Sun) The city centre's main department store, this ugly block has an eclectic range of goods on sale over three floors, ranging from replica Samurai swords and souvenirs to fancy soaps and clothing. It also has a café.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Varna's international **airport** (☎ 573 323; www.varna-airport.bg) is an increasingly busy place with scheduled and charter flights from all over Europe, as well as regular flights to and from Sofia. From the centre, bus 409 goes to the airport.

The local agency for bookings is the **Varna International Airport Travel Agency** (☎ 612 588; ul Knyaz Boris I 15). **Bulgaria Air** (☎ 573 416) flies between Varna and Sofia (one-way/return around €105/160) at least once every day.

BUS

Varna has two bus stations – the **central bus station** (☎ 448 349; bul Vladislav Varenchik 158) is about 2km northwest of the city centre. It's a dingy place with a couple of newsstands, a basic café and a **left luggage office** (☎ 7am-10pm; per hr/day 0.50/4 lv). From here, services go to Athens (100 lv, 26 hours, one daily), Balchik (4 lv, one hour, 16 daily), Burgas (9 lv, two hours, five daily), Dobrich (4 lv, one hour, every 30 minutes), Istanbul (45 lv, 10 hours, two daily), Plovdiv (19 lv, six hours, two daily), Shumen (6 lv, 1½ hours, one daily), Sofia (25 lv, seven hours, 20 daily) and Veliko Tarnovo (9 lv, four hours, 20 daily).

All buses to Sofia go via Shumen and Veliko Tarnovo; the buses to Plovdiv go via Stara Zagora and buses south to Burgas pass through all the coastal resorts, including Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) and Nesebar.

Long-distance and international services are operated by private buses. Tickets for these can be bought at agencies in town, as well as at the bus station, but all departures are from the central bus station.

The second bus station in Varna is the **Chatsna Mladost Station** (☎ 500 039), about 200m along a road that starts almost opposite the central bus station; look for the sign in English opposite the bus station. From here, more frequent minibuses go to smaller places along the Black Sea coast, including Dobrich (4 lv,

one hour, every 30 minutes), Balchik (4 lv, one hour, hourly), Kavarna (5 lv, 1½ hours, hourly), Burgas (9 lv, two hours, every 40 minutes to one hour) and Nesebâr (6 lv, 1½ hours, six daily) via Sunny Beach (5 lv, 1¼ hours).

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 630 414; pl Slaveikov) is a modern, well-ordered place with a recently refurbished booking hall and computer screens listing departures and arrivals in Bulgarian. Facilities include an **internet centre** (☎ 9am-noon & 1-9pm) and a **left-luggage office** (☎ 7.30am-8pm).

Varna is an important destination on the rail network and there's even a connection to Moscow via Bucharest three times a week in summer. Other destinations include Ruse (9 lv, four hours, two daily), Sofia (19 lv, eight hours, seven daily), Plovdiv (15.20 lv, six hours, four daily) and Shumen (5.10 lv, 1½ hours, nine daily).

The **Rila Bureau** (☎ 632 347; ul Preslav 13; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) sells tickets for international services and advance tickets for domestic trains.

Getting Around

The bus and train stations are on opposite sides of the city, and linked by buses 1, 22 and 41. The most useful bus for visitors is 409, which connects the airport with Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) every 15 minutes between 6am and 11pm. This bus passes the central bus station in Varna and Primorski Park (including the Dolphinarium) and also stops outside Sveti Konstantin. It can be caught at designated spots on bul Vladislav Varenchik near the main post office, and along bul Knyaz Boris I. Bus 109 runs between the train station and Golden Sands.

If you need a rental car, **Hertz** (☎ 510 250) and **Avis** (☎ 500 832) have offices at the international section of the airport. **Balkan Tourism** (☎ 618 052; ul A Malinov 4; ☎ 9am-6pm) in the city centre is one of the cheaper outlets, charging from €25 per day including insurance and unlimited kilometres.

SVETI KONSTANTIN СВЕТИ КОНСТАНТИН

Sveti Konstantin is a small, fairly sedate beach resort about 9km northeast of Varna, with hotels attractively spaced out amongst parkland. Established in 1946 under the

name of Druzhiba (Friendship), it was later renamed Sveti Konstantin and Sveti Elena, but is now more commonly known simply as Sveti Konstantin. It's less commercial than other resorts and has long been popular with older holidaymakers; it still has a number of 'rest homes' for retired civil servants and trade union members, and the resort is famous for its therapeutic mineral waters and health treatments. There are several new, up-scale hotels geared towards young families, but this isn't the place for water sports or raucous nightlife.

Orientation & Information

The centre of Sveti Konstantin is the road between the bus stop and beach that passes the post office and the unnamed laneway (which we've called Post Office Lane) between the post office and the Grand Hotel Varna. Another road runs eastwards from the bus stop to the Sunny Day Complex at the far end of the beach. There are no street names and hotels are poorly signposted. There is a map of the resort on a board at the bus stop, but no dedicated maps for sale; Domino's *Varna* map contains a small map of Sveti Konstantin (1:13,000).

There are dozens of foreign exchange offices, as well as the **Biochim Commercial Bank** (Post Office Lane). There's an internet centre on the ground floor of the International House of Scientists Frederic Joliot-Curie (opposite).

Sights & Activities

SV KONSTANTIN & SV ELENA MONASTERY This tiny **church** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk, closed Sun am) is just off Post Office Lane. It was built below street level in the style demanded by the Ottoman rulers during the early 18th century. The church was destroyed not long after but was rebuilt in 1912. More information about the church and the general development of Sveti Konstantin is featured in a small but fascinating display (with explanations in English) on the ground floor of the International House of Scientists Frederic Joliot-Curie.

BEACH

Much of the beach is carved up into private stretches of sand appropriated by the various hotels, but there are plenty of areas accessible to nonguests too. Parasols and sun beds cost around 6 lv to 7 lv each. However, all the beaches tend to be small and bordered by

jetties, breakwaters and rocky outcrops. There are no water sports available here, so if you want to windsurf or jet-ski, head for Albena or Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi).

Tours

There are a few kiosks near the bus stop offering a range of local tours. **Beni Tur** (☎ 432 541; ☎ 10am-10pm) runs day trips to Nesebâr (33 lv), Balchik and Kaliakra Cape (26 lv) and Shumen (35 lv) among others.

Sleeping

International House of Scientists Frederic Joliot-Curie (☎ 361 161; fax 361 187; s/d 53/74 lv, renovated 84/92 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Looking (and sounding) like a remnant of another era, this '60s towerblock just west of the bus stop nevertheless offers good value, and it's definitely worth the extra leva for the neater modernised rooms. It has a mineral-water pool, various balneological treatments are available and the hotel even has its own pharmacy and cactus garden.

Hotel Panorama (☎ 361 025; www.panoramahotel.bg; s/d 55/68 lv; ☎ ☎) Among the cheaper options here, the Panorama is an older establishment facing the main road, with public areas featuring chunky chandeliers and lots of grey marble. The rooms are perfectly acceptable and there are gardens at the back with steps leading down towards the beachfront area.

Estreya Palace Hotel (☎ 361 312; www.hotelestreya.com; s/d incl breakfast 80/120 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) Nestled in secluded parkland around 200m from the beach, this is a smart hotel with large airy rooms, all with balconies. It also has a spa centre offering therapeutic treatments. Prices drop by about a third outside the summer months.

Sirius Beach Hotel (☎ 361 224; www.siriusbeach.com; s/d low season incl breakfast 120/160 lv, high season incl half-board 190/250 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) This flashy glass rotunda is a fairly new place, occupying a narrow curve of beach. It has a variety of bright rooms, all with balconies, and there are indoor and outdoor pools, a kids' play area and a restaurant on a mock-up ship.

Grand Hotel Varna (☎ 361 491; www.grandhotelvarna.com; s/d 210/280 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) The Grand Hotel, with over 300 fresh-looking rooms, certainly lives up to its name, dominating a huge complex that includes four other associated hotels and offering every conceivable amenity, including several restaurants and bars, a bowling alley, tennis courts and spa. Prices vary, and drop by almost half in May and October.

Eating

There are plenty of restaurants around Sveti Konstantin, many attached to hotels, and prices tend to be fairly reasonable compared with the bigger resorts further up the coast. The **Sparm Supermarket** (☎ 24hr) near the bus stop probably offers the best value for self-caterers.

Mehana Marina (☎ 362 616; mains 4-12 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) A few steps up the unnamed lane running east from the bus stop, Marina is a folksy restaurant set in a courtyard planted with trees and little fountains. The menu features traditional Bulgarian cuisine such as *kebabche* (spicy grilled meat sausages), as well as lots of fish dishes, grills and German fare such as bratwurst and schnitzel.

Dolce Vita (☎ 361 491; Grand Hotel Varna; mains from 5 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) One of the five-star hotel's clutch of excellent restaurants, this one serves up good quality Italian food, including pasta and pizza, in an attractive, civilised setting.

Sirius (Sirius Beach Hotel; mains 10-20 lv; ☎ breakfast, lunch & dinner) Certainly the resort's most eye-catching restaurant, set aboard a grounded sailing ship at the side of the Sirius Beach Hotel. Fish dishes, unsurprisingly, are the speciality here, including trout, turbot and paella.

Getting There & Away

Bus 409 travels from Varna airport to Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) every 15 minutes between 6am and 11pm. It stops outside the Hotel Panorama at Sveti Konstantin, from where it's a short walk down to the hotels and the beach. Every 15 to 20 minutes between 6am and 11pm, bus 8 goes directly from Varna to Sveti Konstantin, via ul Maria Luisa and the northeastern end of ul Knyaz Boris I in Varna.

Getting Around

There are better deals to be had in Varna if you want to hire a car, while bicycles can be rented at kiosks near the bus stop (15 lv per day).

GOLDEN SANDS (ZLATNI PYASÁTSI) ЗЛАТНИ ПЯСЪЦИ

Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi) might sound equally as twee as Sunny Beach, but the name is in fact an ancient one for this superb stretch of beach 18km up the coast from Varna. It was among the earliest purpose-built resorts

in Bulgaria, with the first hotel opening here in 1957, though it wasn't until the late '60s that mass tourism (largely from the old Eastern Bloc) really took off. Today it's Bulgaria's second-largest coastal resort, offering around 15,000 beds clustered along, or just off, a 4km stretch of sandy beach, and some of the best nightlife on the coast. It's also a good place for diving, with a number of operators running various trips to sea.

Orientation & Information

Driving a private car into the resort costs 3 lv per vehicle, but visitors arriving by private/public bus or taxi do not have to pay any entrance fees. The resort is long, narrow and easy to get around, and there are plenty of helpful signs in English. The post office and telephone centre are near Hotel Yavor, about halfway along the resort, and there's an internet centre a few metres up from the post office.

Sights

ALADZHA MONASTERY

A major local attraction is the **Aladzha Monastery** (☎ 355 460; admission 3 lv; 🕒 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 4pm Tue-Sat Nov-Mar). Very little is known about this bizarre rock monastery; the cave was probably inhabited as far back as the 5th century BC, but what remains today was created during the 13th and 14th centuries. The monastery was used by monks from the Hesychast order until the 18th century, but was not discovered again until 1928.

Stairs and walkways lead to and around these astonishing caves, which were carved in the cliffside up to 40m above ground. Erosion has caused some damage to the caves, including to the monastery's murals, but it's still a remarkable place. A signposted path (600m) leads to the three-level **catacombs**, probably created in the 13th century.

To walk to the monastery from the resort, head up the road past the post office, cross the main Varna-Albena road outside the Economic & Investment Bank, and follow the signs to 'Kloster Aladja' and the markings along the obvious trail. The walk takes an hour one way and wends its way through a wonderful, shady forest, part of the 1320-hectare **Golden Sands Nature Park**.

The road (3km) is steepish in parts and starts about 500m south along the Varna-Albena road from the start of the walking trail. The infrequent bus 33 from Varna to Kranevo

drops passengers outside the front entrance of the monastery.

Activities

Near the main road, **Aquapolis** (☎ 389 999; www.aquapolis.net; adult/child 25/9 lv; 🕒 10am-7pm) is a new water park featuring lots of different pools, slides and other kid-friendly attractions, including a mini climbing wall. A minibus (1 lv, every 40 minutes) to Aquapolis picks up at various signed points around the resort. The usual water sports, such as **jet-skiing** (15min 60lv) are available on the beach, but they're a little expensive and there's more choice in Albena. **Massages** (1hr about 30lv) seem to be more popular with many visitors, and there are numerous tents and huts along the beach where you can get pummelled.

Hotel Palm Beach has a sports centre open to nonguests, with a pool, sauna and bowling alleys, while on the beachfront, quick thrills are offered by **bungee trampolines** (5min 10lv) and a **ferris wheel** (adult/child 5/3 lv).

Younger kids will delight in the **children's entertainment centre**, with paddle pools, toy trains and water slides, which is near Hotel Sirena.

Diving is another popular activity and there are several outlets along the beach, including the PADI-certified **Harry's Diving Center** (☎ 321 766; todorharbaliev@hotmail.com; 🕒 May-Oct). Single dives, exploring the reefs just 30m offshore, cost 80 lv, while two dives on a WWII wreck off Shabla, 80km north, cost 150 lv. A variety of other dives and courses is available, including four-day scuba courses (€300).

Tours

Dozens of agencies and stalls along the esplanade sell tours such as two-hour **yacht cruises** (30 lv per person), three-hour **fishing trips** (40 lv per person including lunch) and **bus trips** to Nesebâr (33 lv) and Balchik and Kaliakra Cape (26 lv). **Travel Plus** (☎ 0898494578), near the Kempinski Hotel, runs a wide variety of tours, including two-day trips to Istanbul (157 lv per person including lunch and hotel), cruises to Balchik (65 lv per person including lunch) and six-hour Jeep safaris (50 lv).

Sleeping

Virtually all visitors staying in Golden Sands will be on a prebooked package tour, and many of the hotels tend to be booked solid through the summer. However, there are so many hotels here that you should be able to

find a room somewhere. Prices given here are for the high season (June to August).

If you haven't organised accommodation in advance, visit the **accommodation office** (☎ 355 683; Varna-Albena road; per person Jun-Aug 75-125 lv; 🕒 8.30am-8.30pm), behind the bus stop next to DSK Bank. It acts as an agent for only six of the resort's hotels, though. Prices outside the summer will be cheaper, but rates are not available in advance.

Dana Palace Hotel (☎ 383 838; dana_palace@abv.bg; s/d incl breakfast 70/90 lv; 🕒 🍷 🍷) One of the cheaper hotels, set a fair way back from the beach, but offering great value with large, airy rooms, an outdoor pool, kids' playground and restaurant.

Hotel Admiral (☎ 390 200; admiral@goldensands-bg.com; r incl breakfast 250 lv; 🕒 🍷 🍷) Occupying an enviable beachfront location, this huge, gleamingly white, 300-room hotel is one of the top places to stay. The large rooms all have balconies (many facing the sea), and there's an on-site nightclub and spa.

Eating

Food and drink in Golden Sands cost about twice as much as in Varna, but prices are not quite as outrageous as in Albena.

Taj Mahal (☎ 0886600030; mains around 5-7 lv; 🕒 lunch & dinner) Just off the beach, near the Ferris wheel, this little place serves dishes such as chicken korma and lamb vindaloo. The lunch special (curry, rice and a beer) is good value at 10 lv and there's a free Indian dance show from 8.30pm.

Gruzinska Kuchnya (☎ 356 850; mains 10-20 lv; 🕒 lunch & dinner) For something a bit different, check out this Georgian restaurant on the beach opposite Hotel Admiral. Pork stew, lamb shish kebabs, stuffed rabbit and various veggie dishes are on the menu.

Chifflika (mains 10-20 lv; 🕒 24hr) Giant wooden barn near Hotel Astoria serving up hearty, meaty dishes, including roast pork, lamb kebabs and steaks. There's a free floor-show of traditional music and dancing every evening.

Entertainment

Golden Sands has a lively clubbing scene, with numerous venues around the resort, many inside hotels. Restaurants and bars often provide live entertainment, with everything from Bulgarian folk ensembles and

mariachi bands to Elvis impersonators and Tom Jones tribute acts on the bill.

PR Club (☎ 0895500500; www.prclub-bg.com; 🕒 10.30pm-6am) On the beach near all the souvenir stalls, PR plays different music each night, with Retro Night (Thursdays) being one of the most popular. It also attracts international DJs.

Arrogance Music Factory (www.arroganceclub.com; Astera Casino & Hotel; 🕒 10pm-6am) One of the coolest nightspots in town, with four separate areas with very different styles (house and techno, R&B, chill-out lounge and folk-pop). The programme changes nightly.

If you're looking for something a little more cultural, the best you'll get are the slightly tacky shows staged at the open-air amphitheatre by the yacht harbour at the northern end of the beach. Touring dance, music and acrobatic shows take place most nights in summer and tickets (about 24 lv) are sold at the door.

Getting There & Away

There are many entrances to the resort, but the most frequently used ones are in the far south – near the Riviera Hotel complex, at the start of the road to Aladzha Monastery, and at the accommodation office and Economic & Investment Bank 500m further north – and outside the Hotel Zora in the far north.

Buses 109, 209, 309 and 409 leave Varna every 10 or 15 minutes between 6am and 11pm. The buses stop along the main Varna-Albena road at each main entrance to Golden Sands, from where it's no more than a 10-minute walk to any major hotel or the beach. Bus 9 from Varna stops at the southern entrance only, while 409 goes all the way to the Varna airport. These buses can be caught along ul Maria Luisa and the northeastern end of ul Knyaz Boris I in Varna.

Getting Around

If you're not keen on walking, the easiest option is to hop aboard the cute trolleybus (2 lv) that rumbles around the resort, with numerous signed stops. **Sixt** (☎ 0888050511; Kempinski Hotel; 🕒 9am-9pm) charges from €43 per day for car rental, including insurance.

ALBENA АЛБЕНА

☎ 0579

One of the biggest of the Black Sea coast's purpose-built resorts, Albena has been going

since 1969 and is named after the heroine of the eponymous play by Yordan Yovkov. Spread out over a wide area, and with a lovely, 4km-long beach and shallow water ideal for water sports, it's hugely popular with holiday-makers from across Europe. The downside is the horrendous prices charged for just about everything – Albena rivals Sunny Beach (Slánchev Bryag) as the most expensive place in Bulgaria.

Orientation & Information

Albena is the most organised resort in Bulgaria. There are plenty of maps along the streets (even though none of the streets have names) and multilingual staff at tourist booths. There are dozens of foreign exchange offices all over Albena, and most offer competitive rates. Along the main road, both the Biochim Commercial Bank and the SC Express Bank, at the administration building opposite the post office, change travellers cheques and offer cash advances on major credit cards. The post office has an internet centre and telephones for long-distance calls. The main shopping area is along the unnamed road between the Dobrudja and Kardam Hotels.

Entry to the resort by private car costs 3 lv; admission is free for anyone travelling by taxi, private/public bus or minibus.

Resort information and online hotel bookings are available at www.albena.bg.

Sights

The **Cultural Centre** in the middle of the resort is a lukewarm attempt to wean holiday-makers away from the beaches and clubs. It hosts regular performances of touring music, dance and folk shows (tickets about 23 lv to 25 lv), as well as 'comedy magic shows' for kids (12 lv). Posters on the centre's front door and elsewhere around the resort advertise upcoming programmes.

Away from the seafront, the small **Bolata Reserve**, a protected forest that's home to 140 rare plant and animal species, is an unexpected but welcome respite from the crowds.

Activities

Albena offers the best range of activities in the country, and adventurous and sporty types will find enough to satisfy their needs.

All kinds of water sports are available on the beach, including **jet-skiing** (10min 40 lv),

parasailing (10min 50 lv), **surfing** (board hire per hr/day 15/50 lv), **water-skiing** (10min 30 lv) and **banana boating** (10min 10 lv).

Albena Diving Centre (☎ 0888980409; ☎ 9am-6pm), based at Hotel Laguna Beach, offers diving packages (one/two/four dives 69/110/180 lv), plus a range of multiday courses, exploring wrecks and reefs off Albena, Shabla and elsewhere. A four-day scuba course costs 470 lv.

Tennis (court hire day/evening 18/20 lv) is popular and offered at a dozen or so courts all over the resort. Coaching costs from 20 lv per hour. Equipment costs extra.

Albena boasts the largest number of mineral springs in Bulgaria. The **medical centre** (☎ 62 305; Hotel Dobrudja) is the country's largest therapy centre. It offers all sorts of massages (from around 35 lv) and therapies.

Tours

Most hotels and travel agencies around Albena offer a wide range of excursions, such as **bus trips** to Balchik (adult/child 20/10 lv) and three-hour **fishing trips** (adult/child 39/19 lv). Numerous touts along the beachfront hand out leaflets for the latest tours.

Sleeping

Practically everyone visiting Albena will be on a package tour and hotels are often booked by tour operators. Independent travellers may therefore struggle to find acceptably priced rooms here in summer, but if you're determined to stay, you should be able to find something somewhere. Prices following are for summer and are very changeable; for the latest deals and to make an online booking at any of the resort's hotels, see www.albena.bg. Most places close between October and April.

If you arrive without a reservation, it's worth checking out the helpful **accommodation office** (☎ 62 920; bus station; per person 90-130 lv; ☎ 8am-noon), which can organise rooms in many of the resort's hotels. If you want a private room, look for the relevant signs in English, German and Bulgarian outside homes along the main Varna-Balchik road.

Gorska Feya (☎ 62 961; camp sites 10 lv, bungalows 50-80 lv, villas 140-180 lv) Just behind the bus station, this camping ground is spread out through a shady patch of forest. It's a little remote from the centre, though a trolleybus stops outside en route to the beach, and there's an on-site shop. There's a choice of large bungalows and the newer, more attractive ones come with a

TV and fridge. The two-storey 'villas' sleep between four and eight people.

Hotel Dobrudja (☎ 62 020; fax 62 216; s/d incl breakfast 91/140 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Right in the centre of Albena, though not near the beach, this vast concrete hive has unexciting but decent rooms. It has great amenities, though, including several shops, an internet café, nightclub, medical centre and a 17th-floor restaurant. It stays open longer than most hotels around here (May through November).

Hotel Dobrotitsa (☎ 62 869; fax 62 045; d/apt incl breakfast 170/180 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) Another huge, central hotel, though rather more modern than the Dobrudja. The rooms are pretty standard, with TVs and fridges, and there are tennis courts and pools to keep you occupied.

Albena Beach Club (☎ 62 802; fax 62 715; r all-inclusive 210 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ☎) At the far southern end of the beach, this all-inclusive complex has airy, brightly decorated rooms and all the facilities you could ask for. It's used by package-tour groups, so advance bookings are recommended.

Eating

Albena has a profusion of restaurants serving up a vast variety of international dishes. Prices, though, are two or three times more than you would pay in Varna or anywhere else in Bulgaria (outside a couple of the other coastal resorts), so if money's an issue, check the menus before sitting down.

Bistro Dionisius (☎ 62 976; mains 5-12 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) At the northern tip of the beach is this slightly cheaper place, with a varied menu including omelettes, salads, fish and pizzas.

Restaurant Rai (mains 7-20 lv; ☎ 9am-midnight) On the beachfront promenade, Rai offers a menu of Bulgarian grills and steaks, plus salads and a few fish dishes. Diners can enjoy a free 'folklore show' from 8.30pm.

Slaviansky Kât (☎ 62 103; mains 8-20 lv; ☎ lunch & dinner) Behind the Boryana Hotel, this is a replica of a traditional tavern, with lots of meaty fare on the menu and free music and dance shows in the evenings.

Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 62 860) is about 800m from the beach, and is connected to the hotels and beach by trolleybus. Minibuses from Varna (4 lv, 45 minutes) via Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasátsi; 2.50 lv, 20 minutes) depart every

30 minutes between 8am and 7.30pm from a spot known as Makedonia Dom. Every 15 minutes between about 8am and 7.30pm, minibuses leave from Albena for Balchik (2 lv, 20 minutes) and for Dobrich (4 lv, 45 minutes) every 20 minutes. Three or four buses a day travel between Sofia (25 lv, eight hours) and Albena.

Getting Around

Trolleybuses (2 lv) putter along two set routes every 20 minutes between 9am and midnight. Other ways to get around include horse and cart at very negotiable rates, bicycles, available for rent along the beachfront (one hour/two hours/all day 5/9/20 lv), pedal-cars (one hour 12 lv), golf buggies (one hour 45 lv) and even rollerblades (one/two hours 5/9 lv).

Albena Rent-a-Car (☎ /fax 62 010; Hotel Dobrudja) charges from 70 lv per day (one day) or 55 lv per day (two to six days) including unlimited kilometres and insurance, but excluding petrol.

Plenty of predatory taxi drivers line the main roads, and may need persuasion to use their meters.

BALCHIK БАЛЧИК

☎ 0579 / pop 11,800

After the vast, artificial resorts further down the coast, Balchik is a breath of fresh sea air. A small, pretty town and fishing port huddled below white-chalk cliffs, it's a low-key holiday spot that feels like a world away from the likes of Albena, whose lights can be seen winking across the bay at night. The main attraction here is the palace, with its stunning botanical gardens, a couple of kilometres down the coast, and there are a couple of small museums to muse over. The biggest, fenced-off patch of sand (open 8.30am to 6.30pm) is in front of the Helios Hotel, just east of the centre. Otherwise, there's only one Lilliputian sliver of human-made beach crammed with parasols – the rest of the very narrow shoreline consists of rubble and boulders – although there are several concrete jetties used by some tourists for sunbathing and there are plenty of places to swim.

Although it's an easy day trip from Varna, Balchik makes a great base from which to explore attractions in the countryside, such as Dobrich (p277) and Kaliakra Cape (p255), as well as the beach resorts to the south.

History

Greek traders who settled here in the 6th century BC initially called the place Krounoi (meaning 'town of springs'), but later changed the name to Dionysopolis in honour of the god of wine. The Romans came later and fortified the town, and viticulture remained an important mainstay of the local economy. The

town was rebuilt on higher ground in the 6th century AD after being destroyed by a tidal wave. In medieval times, Balchik (possibly meaning 'town of clay') thrived on the export of grain from the hinterlands. In 1913, Balchik (and the rest of the region) was annexed by Romania; it was literally sold back to Bulgaria in 1940 for 7000 'golden leva'.

Information

The post office and telephone centre are on the main square, pl Nezavisimost. There's a branch of Unicredit Bulbank with an ATM opposite the bus station, and you can change money and send/receive cash via Western Union, at **SG Expressbank** (ul Cherno More).

Internet Club (ul Primorska 29; per hr 2.40 lv;

☎ 9am-midnight) Located off pl Ribarski.

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 76 951; ul Primorska; ☎ 8am-8pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) Hands out free basic maps and offers internet access, but is otherwise of little help.

Sights

SUMMER PALACE OF QUEEN MARIE & BOTANICAL GARDENS

Undoubtedly the prize attraction of Balchik is this lovely **palace** (☎ 72 559; adult/under 16yr 10/2 lv; ☎ 8am-8pm). It was built in 1924-26 by King Ferdinand of Romania for his English wife, Queen Marie – a granddaughter of Queen Victoria – as a place of solitude and contemplation (Balchik was then part of Romania). Marie, a follower of the Bahá'í faith, called it 'The Quiet Nest' and allegedly entertained her much younger Turkish lover here.

Far from being palatial, size-wise this is a relatively modest seaside villa, although the architecture – a blend of Bulgarian, Gothic and Islamic styles topped with a minaret – is unique. The half-dozen or so rooms on show contain original furnishings, including oil paintings by the queen, plus a curious collection of local archaeological finds such as Roman pottery and mammoth bones. The Turkish-style bathroom, with its domed ceiling, sunken bath and multicoloured glass windows, is a delight.

Beside the palace are six formal garden terraces, each representing one of the Queen's children, while behind are the extensive **botanical gardens** laid out in the 1950s and run by Sofia University. Around 600 different species of flora are featured throughout a series of themed gardens,

including a vast array of cacti in the 'Garden of the Gods'.

Also within the complex are a **watermill**, a classical-style **nymphaeum** and the tiny **Chapel of Sveta Bogoroditsa**. There's even a **winery**, which offers free tastings, though the bottles on sale are remarkably expensive.

If you're travelling here by bus from the southern coast, get off at the bus stop opposite the palace – either look for the tour buses and souvenir stalls, or ask the driver to drop you off at the *dvorets* (palace). The entrance here leads into the top end of the botanical gardens. The other entrance is off the seafront promenade.

OTHER SIGHTS

The three rooms of the **City Historical Museum** (☎ 72 177; ul Vitosha 3; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) contain a small but diverse collection, including a nude marble torso of Dionysus, a headless statue of Pan, Byzantine coins and medieval pottery. The last room has a display of photographs of the town in the early 1900s, and of the front line in the Balkan War.

Opposite the Historical Museum is the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 72 177; ul Vitosha; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri). In a beautiful old stone house built in 1860, it features a collection of local costumes and displays relating to traditional trades and crafts such as fishing, barrel-making and woodcarving. It's not always open; contact staff at the Historical Museum if it's locked during working hours.

The **Ethnographical Complex** (☎ 72 177; ul Hristo Botev 4; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri), also known as the Bulgarian National Revival Compound, houses dry displays on publishing, literature and education, along with a restored 19th-century schoolroom and a church, originally built in 1866. From the bus station, walk north on ul Cherno More for 20 minutes and look out for the clock tower in the grounds. If you're near the port, take a taxi (about 2.50 lv) because it's a very steep walk.

Sleeping

There are a couple of agencies near the seafront that can arrange accommodation. **Chaika** (☎ 72 053; www.chaikabg.com; pl Ribarski 2) offers private rooms from €12 per person and apartments from €30, while **Svoboda** (☎ 74 707; www.svoboda-tour.com; ul Cherno More 13) has self-contained

apartments from €27 per person, and can also book hotel rooms.

Jay Jays (☎ 0887844953; jayjaysbalchik@yahoo.co.uk; ul Primorska 33; s/d from €15/18; ☎) Run by a jolly British couple, Jay Jays has a handful of neat, simple rooms, one with bunks. There's a bar and restaurant downstairs.

Holiday Beach Hotel (☎ 77 071; www.holiday-beach.info; ul Primorska 23; s/d from 50/100 lv; ☎) Smart, modern hotel just across the road from the beach. Rooms are light and spacious and have walk-out balconies with seating, most with great sea views. The open-air pool on the 1st floor is a plus.

White House (☎ 73 951; ul Geo Milev 18; s/d/stg 70/80/100 lv; ☎) Situated on the seafront, this is a bright and breezy place with 10 double rooms and three studio apartments, all with fridges and TVs. There's a busy restaurant at the front. Prices rise by around 50% in July and August.

Hotel Mistral (☎ 71 130; www.hotelmistralbg.com; ul Primorska 8b; s/d Jul & Aug 170/187 lv, Sep-Jun 88/98 lv; ☎) One of the newest waterfront hotels, the Mistral is an upmarket, four-star place with large, tastefully furnished rooms, many with sea-facing balconies.

Eating

The waterfront between the port and the palace is lined with numerous restaurants, most offering fresh fish on their menus. Many provide live music in the evenings, too, so you can tuck into your grilled trout to the strains of 'Besame Mucho'.

Jay Jays (☎ 0887844953; ul Primorska 33; mains 3-8.50 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) the restaurant of the British-run hotel (above) serves up familiar fare for hungry tourists such as bacon and eggs, burgers and, on Friday nights, fish and chips with mushy peas.

Dvata Petela (☎ 0878704340; mains 4-5 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) The 'Two Cockerels' is one of the cheaper places on the seafront promenade, with seating on a wooden pier perched over the rocks. Pizzas, pork chops, chicken kebabs and various fish dishes are served.

Old Boat (☎ 0887998996; mains 6-15 lv; ☎ 8am-3am) With an attractive waterfront setting overlooking the harbour, this is as good a place as any for fresh fish. The grilled mackerel, shark fillet and bluefish are all good, and it also serves salads and grills.

El Marinero (☎ 71 130; mains 8-25 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) The excellent restaurant of the Hotel

BALCHIK

0 200 m
0 0.1 miles

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BLACK SEA COAST

BLACK SEA

Mistral (p253) is the place to go for some classier cuisine. Fried turbot, smoked salmon, caviar and pepper steaks are among the offerings, and it does particularly good salads.

Getting There & Away

Balchik's **bus station** (☎ 74 069) is at the top of ul Cherno More, a steep 1km walk from the port. Minibuses travel from Balchik to Albena (2 lv, 20 minutes, every 30 minutes), Varna (4 lv, one hour, hourly) and Dobrich (4 lv, 45 minutes, every 45 minutes). There are also eight buses a day to Kavarna (3 lv, 30 minutes) and two to Sofia (20 lv, 10 hours). Rather more conveniently, minibuses to Albena also call at the bus stop on ul Primorska, outside the supermarket. Note that more frequent minibuses travelling from Varna to Kavarna/Shabla stop at the bus shelter opposite the bus station, although no information is posted here; ask at the bus station for times.

KAVARNA КАВАРНА

☎ 0570 / pop 16,800

Kavarna, 17km east of Balchik, is a sleepy administrative town of little interest itself, although today it's famous (in Bulgaria) as the venue for the **Kaliakra Rock Fest** (www.kaliakrrockfest.com), which attracts international acts every

June, and its small beach is pleasant enough. It's also the most practical base for anyone wishing to explore the Kaliakra Cape (opposite).

The pedestrianised ul Dobrotitsa, running south from the bus station, is where you'll find the post office, banks and cafés. Half-way along, the **Church of Sveti Georgi** (ul Rakovskii) is worth a quick look for its icons, modern painting of the Last Judgement, and chatty old ladies. Other (possible) sights include the **History Museum** (ul Chirakman 1), housed in an old mosque, and the **Ethnographical Revival Complex** (ul Sava Ganchev 18), although neither were open to visitors at the time of research.

The seafront is around 3km or so downhill from town, and can be reached by hourly buses from the bus station if you don't fancy the walk. Impressive white cliffs watch over the harbour and sandy beach, which is patrolled by lifeguards, and it's an agreeable place just to lounge about.

Hotel Venera (☎ 84 878; ul Chaika 6; r 18-24 lv; 📍), around 150m from the sea, is among the better options if you wish to stay.

There are a couple of basic beach bars, as well as some restaurants by the bus stop, including **Moryashka Sreshta** (☎ 84 820; mains 4-10 lv; 🍽️ lunch & dinner), which has a particular fondness for oysters – served in salads, pancakes,

with rice and *au naturel* – as well as plenty of other fish dishes.

There are four daily buses to Balchik (3 lv, 30 minutes), one bus every 30 minutes to an hour to Dobrich (4 lv, one hour) and hourly buses to Varna (5 lv, 1¼ hours). There are a few minibuses each day to Bălgarevo and Shabla and one or two to Rusalka and Krapets. The border with Romania is closed along the coast here.

KALIAKRA CAPE НОС КАЛИАКРА

Kaliakra (Beautiful) Cape is a 2km-long headland (the longest along the Bulgarian coastline), about 13km southeast of Kavarna. Together with Balchik, it's a popular day trip by boat and/or bus from the southern beach resorts. Kartografia's *Northern Black Sea Coast* map provides essential details about the reserve and its attractions.

Most of the cape is part of the 687-hectare **Kaliakra Nature Reserve** (admission 3 lv; 🕒 24hr), the only reserve in Bulgaria that partially protects the Black Sea (up to 500m offshore). The reserve also protects fragile wetlands at **Bolata** and **Taukliman** (Bay of Birds), about 100 remote **caves** and over 300 species of birds. Most of the year, the official look-outs along the cape and near Rusalka are ideal spots to watch numbers of increasingly rare dolphins.

Also in the reserve are the ruins of an 8th-century **citadel**, and some ruined churches. The history of the area is explained in some

THE LEGEND OF KALIAKRA

According to a local myth, as the Turks advanced on Kavarna in the 14th century, a group of 40 beautiful young women, fearing a life of slavery, dishonour or worse at the hands of the Ottoman soldiers, tied their long hair together and, holding hands, threw themselves off a cliff along the Kaliakra Cape. Some displays relating to this legend can be seen in Kavarna's History Museum, and a monument at the Kaliakra Cape is dedicated to the women.

detail at the **Archaeological Museum** (admission free; 🕒 10am-6pm), wonderfully located inside a cave (look for signs to the museum).

Anyone visiting the reserve must first go to the **Nature Information Centre** (☎ 057-44 424) in Bălgarevo village, about halfway between Kavarna and Kaliakra Cape. The centre features a display (in English) about the flora, fauna and marine life of the Black Sea.

The tiny seaside town of **Krapets**, in between the protected areas of Lakes Shabla and Durankulak, and close to several archaeological sites, makes an excellent base for exploring the region. Try **Villa Kibela** (☎ 0888880281; www.villakibela.com; r incl half-board €50-60; 📍 📞 📺 📷), a welcoming little place that also arranges walking tours and fishing trips.

Public transport from Kavarna does not reliably go any further than Bălgarevo, so private car is the best way to get here.

COASTAL CONCERNS

Margarita is a tourism and business consultant who manages Villa Kibela in Krapets. She has an active interest in sustainable tourism and in promoting the wild, unspoilt attractions of this northern part of the coast. We asked her for her views on the area's current developments.

What do locals think about foreigners buying up property along the Black Sea?

They think it won't necessarily bring prosperity to rural areas, as individual buyers come mostly for short vacations and are indifferent to the local environment. The assumption is that they buy with an expectation to get a good return in the near future by re-selling. There are big investors developing real estate projects but they're unlikely to respect our cultural and natural heritage. Local property has certainly become more expensive, rising about 30 to 40% in 2007.

How are all the new building developments affecting the environment?

Unfortunately, the situation from the Romanian border down to Varna is becoming critical, I would say, and local biodiversity is in danger. There are almost no fish left in Durankulak Lake, and our coastal dolphins are in danger, too. If no measures are taken, they will soon be gone.

What's the future for tourism in the region?

Green, sustainable tourism is the only way. I hope we can develop sustainable projects in our area.

What are the area's best draws for travellers?

This is an ecologically clean region, free of industry, with 15km of beautiful beach, and still rich biodiversity. In Krapets alone we have numerous swallows and storks. You can see dolphins coming close to shore when the sea is calm. We also have an amazing archaeological heritage, and many unexplored sites.

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