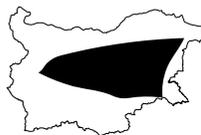


# Central Bulgaria



Bulgaria's central heartland, divided in two by the rolling Stara Planina mountain range, is the place of greatest importance to the country's turbulent modern history and the people and events that shaped the nation. Reminders of this past abound in gorgeous towns such as Lovech and Koprivshitsa, filled with National Revival-period architecture, and at sites of key military victories such as the Shipka Pass. Stunning artistic achievements including the vivid church frescoes of the monasteries at Dryanovo and Troyan and the incredibly detailed masterwork of the 19th-century Tryavna school of woodcarvers attest to the vitality of Bulgarian tradition, and the region's innumerable house-museums preserve the spirit (and wonderful worldly goods) of the freedom fighters and other eminent Bulgarians of yesteryear.

The natural beauty of central Bulgaria, which can be experienced through hiking, climbing, caving, horseback riding and other outdoor activities, has everything to do with its mountain ranges – the Stara Planina and the Sredna Gora, sprawling just to the southeast – and the waterfalls, cliffs, caves and rivers that run through them. At the same time, the lowlands beckon with romantic locales such as the Valley of Roses, near Kazanlak, long famous for its rose oil production.

For many visitors, however, the distilled essence of the central Bulgaria experience comes down to one place: Veliko Tŕrnovo, the magnificent former capital of the Bulgarian tsars, built along rolling hills and bisected by a river, with one of the most impressive fortresses in Europe standing proudly over it. Tŕrnovo's exuberant existence as host to Bulgaria's second-largest university also allows it to boast the best nightlife in central Bulgaria.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- **Magical atmosphere**  
Absorb the fairy-tale castle, churches and old quarters of Veliko Tŕrnovo (p170)
- **Powerful paintings**  
See the frescoes of legendary Zahari Zograf at Troyan Monastery (p190)
- **Age-old artistry**  
Marvel at the hand-carved wood iconostases of the 'Tryavna school' in the pretty town of Tryavna (p183)
- **Mountain meandering**  
Hike Bulgaria's grand 'old mountains' – Stara Planina (p188)
- **Pure Balkans**  
Dive into the dusty, garrulous open market in ethnically mixed Kazanlak (p198)



## SHUMEN ШУМЕХ

☎ 054 / pop 86,660

There's an awful lot of concrete in Shumen, but it does make its own beer, Shumensko Pivo. Not only that, this somewhat faded but friendly industrial city full of communist memorials is crowned by a striking medieval fortress, and has a surprisingly wide range of eateries and drinking spots. Several museums, a park and a lengthy pedestrian mall where the locals stroll and sip coffee round out the local attractions.

Recent additions on the sleeping scene have also brought fancier, though still quite affordable, accommodation to town, making Shumen an even more comfortable base for day trips to the towns of Veliki Preslav, Madara (p169) and even Kotel (p209). The city's location, at the base of a low spur of the Stara Planina ranges, about halfway between the Black Sea coast and the Danube, also means it's within a couple of hours' drive of several unique destinations.

For information on local winery tours, see p66.

## History

Thracians and then Romans originally settled and fortified Shumen. After the migration of the Turkic Bulgars in the 6th century, nearby Veliki Preslav and Pliska became the centres of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom. In 1388, the Ottomans captured Shumen, renaming it Chumla. It became an important market town and, in the final days of Ottoman domination, part of the Turks' strategic quadrangle (along with Ruse, Silistra and Varna) of towns fortified to defend against Russian advances in 1877. Reminders of Ottoman multi-ethnicity remain with Shumen's minority Jewish, Armenian and Muslim communities.

## Orientation

The bus station and adjacent train station are at Shumen's eastern end. The long pedestrian mall, bul Slavyanski, stretches from the city park to the main square, pl Osvozhdenie. Most services, cafés and restaurants are on or around the mall and square.

## Information

**Biochim Commercial Bank** (bul Slavyanski)

**Helikon** (☎ 800 103; bul Slavyanski 88; ☎ 9am-8pm)

Has a few English-language books on Bulgaria and maps.

**Internet Café** (ul Hristo Botev)

**Post office** (pl Osvozhdenie; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri)

**SG Ekspres Bank** (pl Osvozhdenie; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM and does Western Union money transfers.

**Telephone centre** Inside the post office.

**Unicredit Bulbank** (bul Slavyanski; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri)

**United Bulgarian Bank** (ul Tsar Osvozhditel)

## Sights

### SHUMEN FORTRESS

Towering over the city from a steep hillside, the **Shumen Fortress** (☎ 858 051; adult/student 3/1.50 lv; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-5pm Nov-Mar) dates originally to the early Iron Age. It was augmented and reinforced by the Thracians in the 5th century BC, and between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD, the Romans added towers and more walls. It was again fortified later on by the Byzantines, who made it an important garrison. During the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1396), the fortress was one of north-east Bulgaria's most significant settlements, renowned for its pottery and metalwork. However, invading Ottomans in the late 14th century burnt and looted the fortress.

Wandering the fortress is fun, with notice boards dotted around the site. A yellowing information booklet (2 lv) is also available at the gate. The fortress is about 5.5km up from the mosque. A taxi costs about 3.50 lv one way.

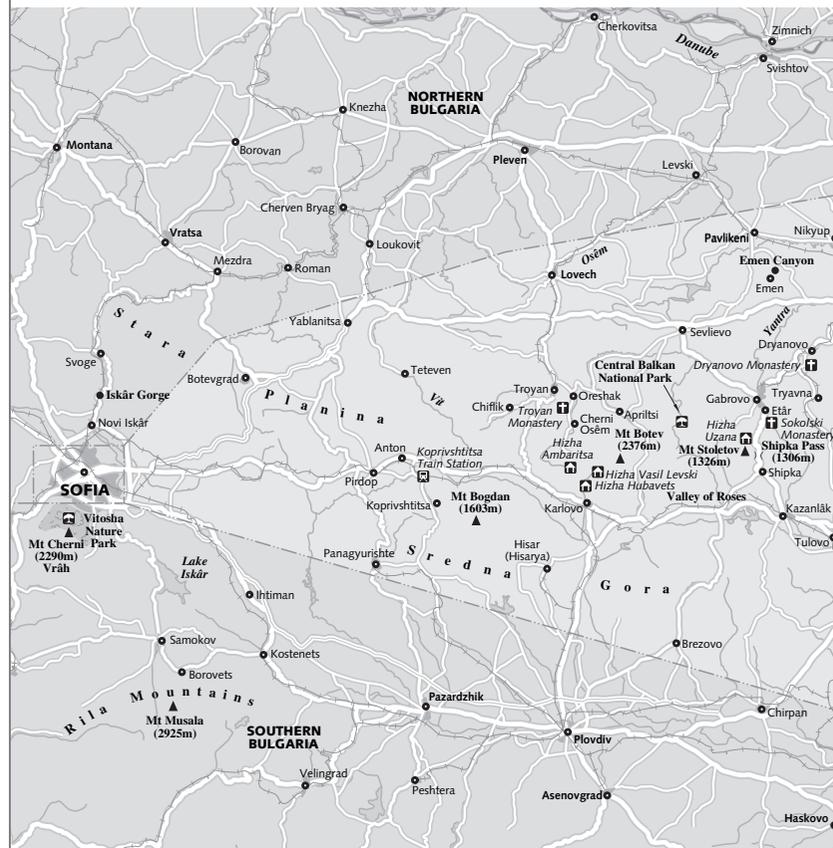
From the fortress entrance, a 3km path leads to the gigantic Creators of the Bulgarian State Monument, which then brings you to the city centre.

### CREATORS OF THE BULGARIAN STATE MONUMENT

This massive, Soviet-era hilltop monument was built in 1981 to commemorate the First Bulgarian Empire's 1300th anniversary. To get here on foot, climb the staircase behind the History Museum. The 3km path leads from the equally communist **Partisan's Monument**. The circuitous 5km road going there starts along ul Sv Karel Shkorpil at the History Museum. Go by taxi (3.50 lv one way), and then just walk back down the steps leading to the city centre.

Shumen's **Information Centre** (☎ 852 598; admission 3 lv; ☎ 8.30am-5pm winter, 8am-7pm summer), about 300m from the Creators of the Bulgarian State Monument, has information about the structure and surrounding flora. A 3km path passes the Information Centre and car park, finishing at Shumen Fortress.

## CENTRAL BULGARIA



## TOMBUL MOSQUE

Arguably Bulgaria's most beautiful mosque, and definitely the largest still in use, Shumen's **Tombul Mosque** (☎ 856 823; ul Doiran; admission 2 lv; 🕒 9am-6pm) was built in 1744. Also called the Sherif Halili Pasha Mosque, its Turkish nickname, *tombul* (plump) refers to the shape of its 25m-high dome. The 40m-high minaret has 99 steps. According to local Muslim belief, the courtyard fountain gushes sacred water. An informative leaflet (in English and French) is available.

The ruins of the **Bezisten**, a 16th-century Turkish covered market, are just down the road from the mosque; however, they are closed for renovations (at time of research, no completion date could be found).

## HISTORY MUSEUM

This brick **museum** (☎ 857 487; bul Slavyanski 17; admission 2 lv; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) on the main road exhibits numerous Thracian and Roman artefacts from Madara, Veliki Preslav and Pliska. Ancient coins, icons and a scale model of the Shumen Fortress as it was in its heyday are also on display.

## MUSEUM COMPLEX OF PANCHO VLADIGEROV

One of several National Revival and early-20th-century baroque houses dotted along the cobblestone western section of ul Tsar Osvoboditel is the **Museum Complex of Pancho Vladigerov** (☎ 852 123; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 136; admission 1.50 lv; 🕒 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), commemorating



Bulgaria's most renowned composer and pianist. The handsome structures include a library, set around a shady courtyard garden.

## PRIPODEN PARK

Also known as Kyoshkovete Park, this large, 3930-hectare park on Shumen's western edge has some modest, shaded **hiking trails**. You'll see and hear the humming of the city's most famous product being made at the nearby Shumensko Pivo Brewery.

## Festivals &amp; Events

**Days of Shumen Cultural Festival** Mid-May

**Folklore Festival** August

**Watermelon Festival** Last Sunday in August

## Sleeping

**Hotel Pazara** (☎ 0887292756; ul Maritsa 15; d 30-40 lv; 🕒) The plain Pazara, just north of bul Simeon Veliki, is simply a set of clean but characterless rooms (some with shared bathrooms), but nothing else. It's a 10-minute walk from pl Osvobozhdenie. When on ul Maritsa, look above Bistro Stives (you'll see the Coke sign), go in through the gates and take the staircase up.

**Hotel Madara** (☎ 800 180; fax 877 078; pl Osvobozhdenie; s/d 30/40 lv) Rearing up from the far end of the square, the monstrous Madara is a communist relic with very basic rooms.

**Aktion Center Complex** (☎ 801 081; www.aktioncenter.com; ul Vasil Drumev 12; s/d/apt 38/42/68 lv) Surprisingly situated right in the centre, the



Aktion Center has 11 rooms and five apartments, all done in a snazzy modern style, which management swears is Italian. With facilities like a manicurist, hairdresser and cosmetics salon, it appeals to those requiring some pampering.

**Solo Guest House** (☎ 981 571; www.hotelsolo-bg.com; ul Panaiot Volov 2; s/d 40/50 lv) This brand new guest-house has an excellent central location and well-kept rooms with all mod cons and room service. Although it's pitched at business travellers, Solo's reasonable rates means it's also a nice find for those travelling, well, solo.

**RAI Family Hotel** (☎ 802 670; www.hotel-rai.eu; ul Ohrid 26a; s/d/apt 40/55/85 lv) Another new hotel, the RAI has a quiet setting near the Shumensko Plato Nature Park. Rooms are spacious and well done, with all amenities including hydromassage showers, a fitness centre and a solarium.

**Hotel Zamaka** (☎ 800 409; www.zamakbg.com; ul Vasil Levski 17; s/d/apt 40/60/85 lv) This lovely new hotel in a quiet residential neighbourhood just west from the main square has friendly staff and cosy rooms, set around a garden courtyard with a traditional restaurant. As

with the Solo, décor does not astonish but is modern, clean and well kept. All expected amenities, including wireless internet.

## Eating

Shumen's best traditional restaurants are located along ul Tsar Osvoboditel, near the main square.

**Katmi** (pl Osvobozhdenie 12; pancakes 2 lv; ☎ 7.30am-8pm) This local take-away institution, off a side entrance on the square, offers delicious *palachinki* (pancakes) – much better than the usual Balkan crepe – with a choice of 122 different combinations. A pancake with all-natural blueberry and strawberry jam is especially tasty.

**Mehana Popsheitanova Kushta** (☎ 802 222; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 158; mains 4-7 lv; ☎ 11am-2am) This wood-framed traditional restaurant has big outdoor benches and big portions, too. Try the chicken *shishle* 'special' (skewered chicken interspersed with cooked red peppers, onions, tomatoes and a little mushroom on the side).

**Biraria Regal** (☎ 802 301; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 108; mains 5-7 lv; ☎ 8am-2am) Like the Dom na Architekta,



this traditional *mehana* (tavern) further east on ul Tsar Osvoboditel enjoys a leafy garden setting and offers a good selection of grills and salads.

**Dom na Architekta** (☎ 088938585; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 145; mains 5-8 lv; ☎ 8am-1am) This wood-and-stone traditional tavern has great Bulgarian specialities, served in a balmy back garden in summer, moving indoors in front of a crackling fire in winter.

## Drinking & Entertainment

Numerous good cafés line the leafy pedestrian mall of ul Slavyanski; other popular places off this main strip are listed following.

**Biraria Guinness** (☎ 872 218; ul Hristo Botev 18; ☎ 10am-5am Mon-Fri, 5pm-5am Sat & Sun) This beer hall across from Mehana Popsheitanova Kushta is a popular nightspot with locals, going well into the wee hours.

**10th Town Café** (☎ 0899838344; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 53; ☎ 7am-midnight Mon-Fri, 10am-midnight Sat & Sun) The name of this sleek café refers to Shumen's rank among Bulgarian cities. It aspires, with its wireless connection, colourful décor and Spanish coffee, to scale new cosmopolitan heights. The

café offers that relative rarity in the Balkans, a room for nonsmokers, plus a summer garden.

**Club Retro** (☎ 832 742; City Park; ☎ 8am-1am) This café in the park is good for a relaxing coffee by day, or for cocktails at night. There's salsa dancing on Fridays.

**Nightclub Colosseum** (☎ 830 444; ul Simeon Veliki; admission 2 lv; ☎ 10pm-4am Mon-Sat) Drunken Bulgarians, aerosol cans and a lighter might seem a dangerous combination, but there are even hotter things besides 6ft-high flames inside this big student nightclub. Different theme nights range from student nights to DJ parties and retro.

## Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 830 890; ul Rilski Pohod), buses go to Burgas (13 lv, three hours, four daily), Ruse (7 lv, two hours, three daily), Dobrich (13 lv, two hours, four daily), Silistra (6 lv, 2½ hours, three daily), Veliko Târnovo (11 lv, two hours, several daily), Madara (1.50 lv, 20 minutes, five daily) and Veliki Preslav (1 lv to 1.30 lv, 30 to 60 minutes, three daily). There are also buses to Sofia (21 lv, six hours, hourly) and Varna (8 lv, 1½ hours, nine daily). Private buses, such as those operated by **Etap Adress** (☎ 830 670), also stop in Shumen on the route between Sofia and Varna.

From the **train station** (☎ 860 155; pl Garov) daily trains (including one express) go to Varna (3.90 lv, two hours, nine daily), and fast trains serve Sofia (10.70 lv, four to seven hours, two daily). There are services to both Ruse (7 lv, three hours, daily) and Plovdiv (13 lv, six hours, daily). A couple of trains stop at Madara. The station has a **left-luggage office** (☎ 24hr) inside.

Taxis wait outside both the bus and train stations, and are easy to find in town.

## AROUND SHUMEN

**Madara** Мадара  
☎ 05313 / pop 1400

An important town for the mysterious Thracians around 7000 years ago, this village, 16km east of Shumen, was also settled during the Roman occupation. It's most famous today for the Madara Horseman, a grand rock carving from the early Bulgar khanate of the 8th century.

## SIGHTS

The **Madara National Historical & Archaeological Reserve** (☎ 2095; adult/student 4/1 lv; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm)

surrounds the so-called Madara Horseman (*Madarski Konnik*). Carved into a cliff 23m above the ground, the bas-relief features a mounted figure spearing a lion and followed by a dog. It was an early-8th-century creation, made to commemorate the victorious Khan Tervel, and, more profoundly, the creation of the First Bulgarian Empire (681–1018). As Bulgaria's only known medieval rock carving, it's listed as a Unesco World Heritage site. Since the permanent scaffolding hides more of the bas-relief the closer you get, it's not necessary to climb all the way to the figure to get the best views.

North of the horseman, a 373-step stairway hewn out of rock leads to the 130m-high clifftop and the ruined **Madara Fortress**, built during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396) to protect the capitals, Pliska and Veliki Preslav. There are sweeping views from above.

At the reserve's entrance gate you can pick up the *Madara* booklet (2 lv, in English or German), which explains the site and gives information on the popular hiking trails to the nearby **tombs** and **caves**.

#### FESTIVALS & EVENTS

**Madara Horseman Music Days Festival** Held in the reserve on four successive Thursdays from mid-June to mid-July.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Camping Madara** (☎ 5313; camp site per person 7 lv, cabins 20 lv), a shady and peaceful camping spot 500m from the horseman has a small restaurant, while **Hizha Madarski Konnik** (☎ 2091; dm 17 lv) offers dorm rooms.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Public transport to Madara is limited, and the horseman is 3km up a steep road from the village. Several daily trains between Shumen and Varna stop at Madara. Buses to Madara from Shumen are infrequent, so get a bus from Shumen to Kaspichan (five daily), then a minibus to Madara from there. A taxi from Shumen costs 25 lv return, including waiting time. There are no taxis in Madara.

### VELIKO TÂRNOVO ВЕЛИКО ТЪРНОВО

☎ 062 / pop 75,000

The evocative capital of the medieval Bulgarian tsars, sublime Veliko Târnovo is

dramatically set amidst an amphitheatre of forested hills, divided by the ribboning Yantra River. Commanding pride of place is the magisterial, well-restored Tsarevets Fortress, citadel of the Second Bulgarian Empire. It is complemented by scores of churches and other ruins, many of which are still being unearthed.

Overgrown Trapezitsa Hill, one time residence of Bulgaria's kings, is especially exciting in this regard, and clambering up to it you will encounter teams of local helpers digging away at numerous church foundations and washing colourful Byzantine ceramic plates. Since there's much work to be done still, chances are good that Trapezitsa will yield many more treasures.

As the site of Bulgaria's most prestigious university, Veliko Târnovo also boasts a revved-up nightlife of which many larger towns would be jealous. There's great food and drink, too, with the best places enjoying stunning views of the river and castle. The old-world ambience of the Varosha quarter, with its terracotta rooftops and lounging cats, makes for wonderful leisurely walks in a place where you can feel the spirit of a bygone time.

As one of the main stops on the Bucharest–Istanbul express train, Veliko Târnovo is also a favourite with backpackers, as the ever-increasing number of youth hostels attests. However, it's also popular with weekenders Bulgarians drawn by its romantic ambience and European tour groups peering over the sites. Certainly, it's one of the 'obligatory' destinations for getting the full Bulgarian experience, but Târnovo is well worth it, and will probably draw you in for at least a few days.

For more information on local wineries, see p66 and p66.

#### History

The strategic geography of Târnovo's hills led them to be settled from the earliest times. Neolithic people in 5500 BC, and Thracian tribes three millennia later, inhabited Tsarevets Hill (on which the fortress stands today) and Trapezitsa Hill opposite. The Romans built the fortress's first walls and, in the 6th century AD, Byzantine Emperor Justinian created a citadel. Slavic tribes captured the town in the 7th century.

Under the leadership of brothers Asen and Petâr, Târnovgrad became a centre of rebellion against the Byzantine rulers. With the foundation of the Second Bulgarian Empire in 1185, Târnovgrad would become second only to Constantinople in importance, and trade and culture flourished for the next 200 years.

On 17 July 1393, the Ottomans captured Târnovgrad, destroying the fortress on the hill. No longer very strategic in the middle of a vast empire, the town was allowed to stagnate through Ottoman times until Bulgarian nationalism asserted itself during the mid-19th century. In 1877, during the Russo-Turkish War, the Russian General Gurko liberated Târnovgrad from the Turks. Because of its importance during the Second Bulgarian Empire, Veliko Târnovo (as it was renamed) was the location for writing Bulgaria's Constitution in 1879, and was where the independence of the Bulgarian state was officially proclaimed in 1908.

#### Orientation

Veliko Târnovo is based along a ridge above the Yantra River (probably derived from the Thracian word *yatrus* meaning 'quick flowing'). The river winds in a horseshoe bend between four hills: Tsarevets, site of the fortress; Momina Krepost, several kilometres to the east; Trapezitsa; and Sveta Gora (Holy Mountain).

The centre of town runs along ul Nezavisimost and ul Stefan Stambolov, between the post office and a huge underpass. Where ul Rakovski branches up from the latter street is where you'll find the traditional crafts shopping quarter, Samovodska Charshiya; above that is the quiet old town, Varosha. Târnovo's modern part, generally unvisited by tourists, spreads out to the west and southwest from ul Vasil Levski.

#### MAPS

Find the *Infoguide Veliko Turnovo* booklet (5 lv), packed with practical and cultural information in English, at the Tourist Information Centre and most bookstalls. Local monasteries are chronicled in *The V Turnovo Monasteries: A Guide* (4 lv). The Domino *Veliko Târnovo* map of town also includes maps of Tsarevets Fortress and Arbanasi.

#### Information

##### BOOKSHOPS

**Knisharnitsa Apoloniya** (☎ 620 287; ul Stefan Stambolov 65; ☎ 9am–7.30pm Mon–Sat, 10am–6.30pm Sun) Central bookstore with maps, Lonely Planet guides and other English-language travel books.

##### INTERNET ACCESS

Most hotels and hostels have wi-fi connections, and sometimes computers.

**I-Net Internet Centre** (off ul Hristo Botev; per hr 1.50 lv) Under Mustang Food restaurant.

##### LAUNDRY

**Ladybird** (ul Hadji Dimitar 25; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun) Same-day service; 5 lv per load.

##### MEDICAL SERVICES

**Hospital Stefan Cherkeзов** (☎ 626 841; ul Nish 1) A modern hospital with an emergency room and English-speaking doctors, in the new part of town.

##### MONEY

Foreign exchange offices are plentiful. The following banks have ATMs:

**Alpha Bank** (ul Stefan Stambolov) Near the corner where the main road forks down to ul Gurko.

**First East International Bank** (ul Stefan Stambolov 1).

**United Bulgarian Bank** (ul Hristo Botev 3) Near the Cinema Poltava complex.

##### POST

**Main post office** (ul Hristo Botev 1; ☎ 7am–10pm)

##### TELEPHONE

**Telephone centre** Inside the post office.

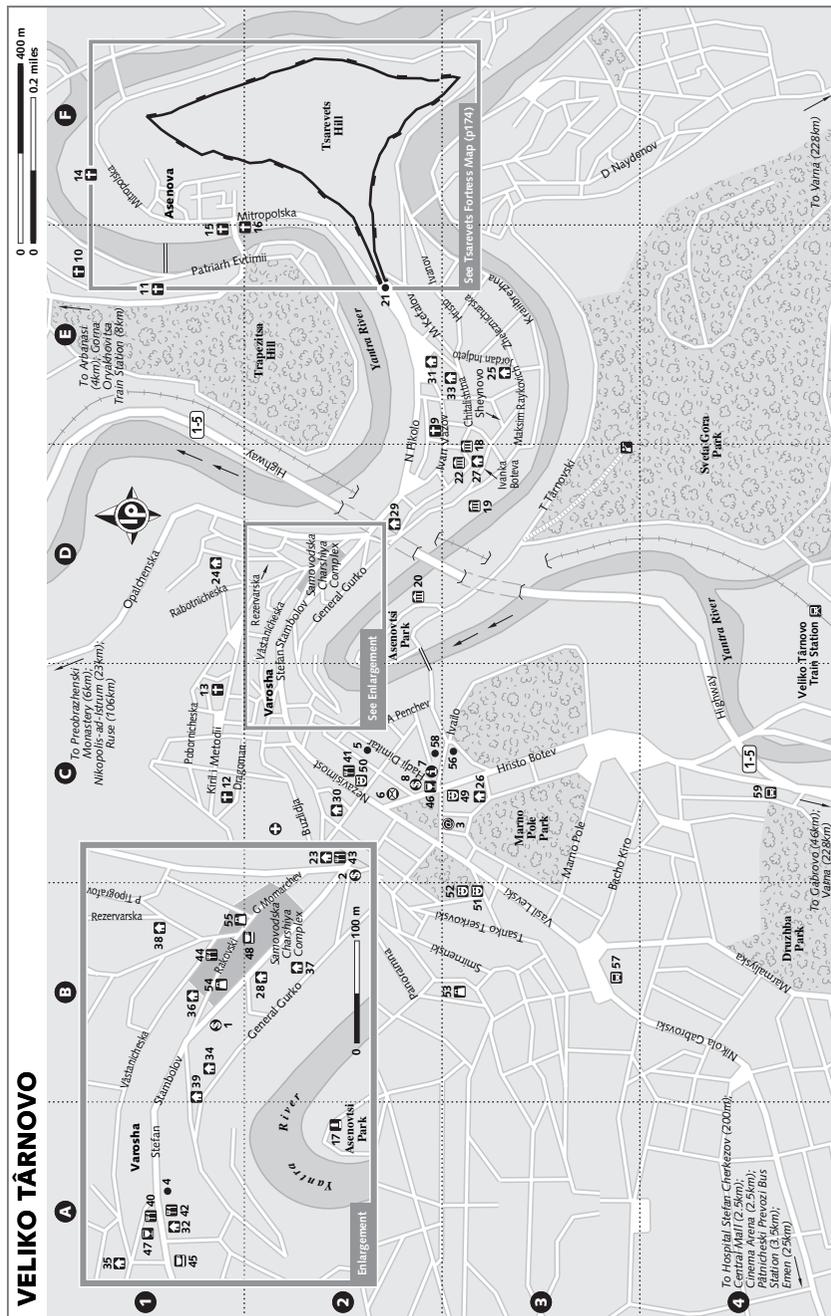
##### TOURIST INFORMATION

**Tourist Information Centre** (TIC; ☎ 622 148; fax 600 768; tic\_vt@mobikom.com; ul Hristo Botev 5; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat) Helpful English-speaking staff assist with everything from basic info and excursions to booking private rooms and onward travel. It stocks leaflets from many hotels and hostels.

#### Sights

##### TSAREVETS FORTRESS

The inescapable symbol of this proud medieval town, this reconstructed fortress dominates the skyline, and is one of Bulgaria's most beloved monuments. The **Tsarevets Museum-Reserve** (☎ 638 841; adult/child 4/2 lv; ☎ 8am–6pm Apr–Oct, 9am–5pm Nov–Mar) is located on Tsarevets Hill, which has been settled since time immemorial



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due to its strategic location. Thracians and Romans used it as a defensive position, but the Byzantines built the first significant fortress here between the 5th and 7th centuries. The fortress was rebuilt and fortified by the Slavs and Bulgars between the 8th and 10th centuries, and again by the Byzantines in the early 12th century. When Tărnovgrad became the Second Bulgarian Empire's capital, the fortress was truly magnificent, but with the Turkish invasion in 1393, it was sacked and destroyed. Tourists can thank the Soviets for returning it to a semblance of its former glory (although some archaeologists grumble about the faithfulness of the restoration).

The remains of over 400 houses, 18 churches and numerous monasteries, dwellings, shops, gates and towers have so far been uncovered. The Patriarch's Complex and Baldwin Tower have received the most restoration, and there is plenty of random rubble lying about. Not much English-language information is provided, but guided English-language tours (10 lv) can be arranged by enquiring in the Tourist Information Centre.

Entering the structure, pass through two gates and veer left (northeast) for the fortress walls, some of which were once 12m high and 10m thick. Further along the walls are the unrecognisable remains of a 12th-century **monastery**, various **dwellings & workshops** and two

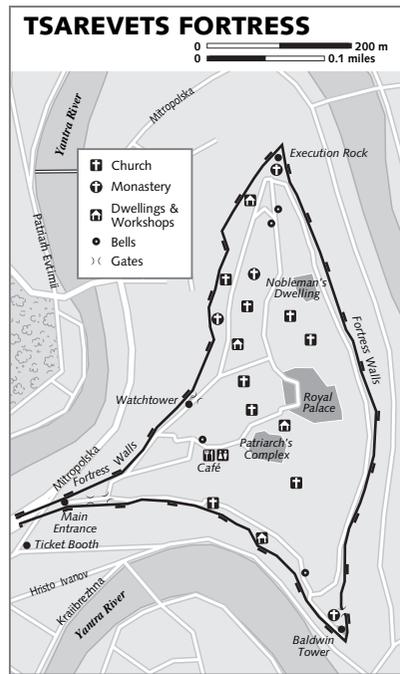
**churches**. To the north lie remains of a 13th-century **monastery**, and **Execution Rock**, from which traitors were pushed into the Yantra River. Alleged traitor Patriarch Joachim III was the most famous figure to take the plunge, in 1300.

The complex's eastern path is unremarkable, so return to the middle, using the hill-top Patriarch's Complex as a landmark. Past one of several modern bells (used in the sound and light show; see the boxed text, p175) are a ruined **noblemen's dwelling** and two **churches** to the left (east).

Below the Patriarch's Complex are the foundations of the **Royal Palace**, from where 22 successive kings ruled Bulgaria. Once covering 4500 sq metres, the palace included an appropriately enormous (about 30m by 10m) throne and Roman columns, probably transferred from nearby Nikopolis-ad-Istrum.

From the palace, head west to the main path and up the steps to the **Patriarch's Complex**, also called the Church of the Blessed Saviour. Once about 3000 sq metres in size, it was probably built about 1235, but has been extensively restored. The views of the city from the front steps are more impressive than the modern murals inside, depicting 14th- and 15th-century Bulgarian history.

Returning towards the main entrance, veer left along the path hugging the southern



wall. At its end is the restored **Baldwin Tower**, where Baldwin I of Flanders – the perfidious Crusader who led the sack of Christian Byzantium in 1204 – got his just deserts, imprisoned and executed after his defeat by the Bulgarians a year later. There are great views from the top.

### SARAFKINA KÀSHTA

Built in 1861 by a rich Turkish merchant and moneylender, this fine five-storey National Revival-period style **house-museum** (☎ 635 802; ul Gurko 88; adult/student 4/2 lv; ☞ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Fri) displays antique ceramics, metalwork, woodcarvings and jewellery, and has some fascinating exhibits about traditional costumes and breadmaking. Revival-period furniture fills the upper floor, along with vintage family photos on the walls.

### MUSEUM OF NATIONAL REVIVAL & CONSTITUENT ASSEMBLY

This **museum** (☎ 629 821; ul Ivan Vazov; admission 4 lv; ☞ 8am–6pm Wed–Mon), in a former Turkish town hall built in 1872, was where Bulgaria's first

National Assembly was held seven years later to write the country's first constitution.

The ground floor contains numerous costumes, books and photos about Veliko Tàrnovo's history. The former assembly hall, upstairs, displays portraits of local personages of note. The basement has classic old town photos, and some valuable icons.

### VELIKO TÀRNOVO ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Housed in a grand old building with a colonnaded terrace and courtyard full of Roman sculptures, the **archaeological museum** (☎ 634 946; ul Ivan Vazov; adult/under 7yr 4/2 lv; ☞ 8am–6pm Tue–Sun) contains Roman artefacts from Nikopolis-ad-Istrum and more Roman pottery and statues from elsewhere. Medieval Bulgarian exhibits include huge murals of the tsars, while there's also some ancient gold from nearby Neolithic settlements.

### CHURCHES

Most of Veliko Tàrnovo's numerous churches are closed on Wednesdays.

The **Forty Martyrs Church** (ul Mitropolska; ☞ 9am–6pm Thu–Tue), in the old Asenova quarter, was originally built in 1230 to celebrate Tsar Asen II's victory over the Byzantines. It was used as a royal mausoleum, and then as a mosque by the Turks.

Across from it is the tiny **Church of the Assumption**, built in 1923 over a ruined 14th-century church. The church is usually closed, but it's very pretty with blue-painted bas-reliefs decorating its sides.

Two blocks north, the late-13th-century **Church of Sveti Petar & Pavel** (☎ 638 841; ul Mitropolska; adult/concession 4/2 lv; ☞ 9am–5pm) features three layers of remarkable 11th- and 17th-century murals. This is the most interesting of the churches, mainly as there are some surviving early-11th-century wall paintings. The best preserved is in the corner to the left of the altar, where Jesus on the cross is being comforted by the Virgin Mary.

Across the river, enclosed by a high wall, is Tàrnovo's oldest church, the beautifully proportioned **Church of Sveti Dimitàr** (ul Patriarh Evtimii; admission 4 lv; ☞ by arrangement). Built in the so-called Tàrnovo style, it was named after St Dimitrios, patron saint of Thessaloniki in northern Greece. During the church's consecration in 1185, Tsars Asen and Petàr proclaimed an uprising against Byzantine rule,

which would create the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396). It's often closed, but a warden at the Church of Sveti Petar & Pavel can open it on request.

The nearby **Church of Sveti Georgi** (☎ 620 481; ul Patriarh Evtimii; admission 4 lv; ☞ by arrangement), probably built in 1612 on medieval church ruins, was initially destroyed by the Ottoman invaders, but restored during their rule in the early 18th century. It boasts impressive murals inside. The Tsarevets Fortress ticket office arranges visits.

There are also notable frescoes at the **Church of Sveta Bogoroditsa** (☞ 9am–5pm), the town's main cathedral. Located just off ul Ivan Vazov, the church's large green neo-Byzantine domes distinguish it on the old town's skyline.

Up in Varosha, visit the **Church of Sveti Nikolai** (ul Vàstanicheska; ☞ 9am–5pm), built in 1879. After, follow the steps on the left (western) side, and turn left along ul Kiril i Metodii to the **Sveti Kiril i Metodii Church** (☞ 9am–5pm), which has an elegant tower.

### STATE ART MUSEUM

Dramatically situated in a tight bend of the Yantra River, the **State Art Museum** (☎ 638 941; Asenovtsi Park; adult/student 3/1 lv; ☞ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun) contains paintings of Veliko Tàrnovo and the region by numerous artists. The 2nd floor exhibits more artworks, mostly on permanent loan from galleries in Silistra, Dobrich and Ruse. Guided tours (in English and French) are available for about 5 lv extra per person; entry is free on Thursdays.

Nearby, the **Monument of the Asens** is an awe-inspiring commemoration of the establishment of the Second Bulgarian Empire in 1185; there are great views over the town and river.

### THE SOUND & LIGHT SHOW

Tàrnovo rocks out with medieval flair during the Sound & Light Show, a nocturnal event that sees the whole of Tsarevets Hill lit up in great flashes of colour and rumbling music, a spectacular homage to the Second Bulgarian Empire. The show doesn't happen unless a certain number of people have bought tickets, but during the summer it happens most nights, as there are always tour groups in town. The show is 40 minutes long and apparently relates the rise and fall of the Second Bulgarian Empire (although for most people it will just be a pretty array of flashing lights set to music).

To find out if the show is happening, ring the organisers on ☎ 636 828 or ask the Tourist Information Centre (p171) or your hotel to check for you. Alternatively, turn up at the fortress and hope the show is on, or do what most locals and visitors do: listen for the bells, and look for the laser beams. Starting time is anywhere from 8pm to 9.30pm depending on the time of year.

### Activities

Numerous local operators offer **hiking, mountain biking, horse riding** and **caving**; for more information contact the Tourist Information Centre (p171). The helpful staff provide special hiking maps and can link you with the right people. The Centre also offers the useful *Climbing Guide*, good for serious rock climbers.

Rock-climbing trips and training at nearby massifs can be arranged at **Trapezitsa** (☎ /fax 635 823; www.trapezitsa-1902.hit.bg; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; ☞ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Fri) based in the eponymous hotel.

### Festivals & Events

**Holiday of Amateur Art Activities** (early May) Also known as the Balkan Folk Festival, it's held over a period of 10 days.

**International Festival of Religious Music** (June)

This new festival presents Bulgarian, Romanian and other choral singers in the fortress; ask at the Tourist Information Centre (p171) for details.

**International Folklore Festival** (late June–mid-July) Three-week festival with over 300 acts from Bulgaria and other Balkan countries. Details are usually available from mid-April (☎ 630 223).

### Sleeping

There's been a veritable explosion in accommodation options in Veliko Tàrnovo over the past couple of years, though thankfully this hasn't damaged the town's aesthetic allure, as hotels tend to blend in with their surroundings. The proliferation of youth hostels, in particular, guarantees competitive prices and a wide range of free services. Boutique hotels are also seeing plenty of opportunity in romantic Tàrnovo.

**BUDGET**

The Tourist Information Centre (p171) finds private rooms (25 lv to 35 lv for a single/double). For atmosphere, stay near the Samovodska Charshiya Complex (p178) in the Varosha district, along the lower (southeastern) end of ul Gurko, or near Tsarevets Fortress.

**Hikers Hostel** (☎ 0889691661, 0887098279; www.hikershostel.org; ul Rezervoarska 91; tent/dm/d ind breakfast 12/20/50 lv; 📶) Târnovo's most laid-back hostel, Hikers is run by the energetic Toshe Hristov, who is constantly transferring guests or taking them on day trips. Simple but clean dorms (one with four beds, the other with 10), plus one double room are on offer; the patio also has two tents. The upper balcony, outfitted with couches, has great views and when the Sound & Light Show (see p175) is on it's fun to watch the far-off spectacle from here with a cold beer. The hostel, which has laundry service, free wireless internet and computers, is a five-minute uphill walk from the Samovodska Charshiya Complex. Call for free pick-up from the train or bus stations.

**Hostel Mostel** (☎ 0897859359; www.hostelmostel.com; ul Jordan Indjeto 10; tent/dm/d ind breakfast & dinner 14/20/60 lv) The famous Sofia-based Hostel Mostel has made a splash in Târnovo with this big, new place, set in a renovated 170-year-old house just 150m from Tsarevets Fortress. The hostel offers clean, very modern dorm rooms and doubles with sparkling bathrooms. The back garden has a BBQ, and a downstairs 'party room' is in the works. They even throw in free dinner and a glass of beer. Call for free pick-ups from the train or bus stations.

**Loft Hostel** (☎ 603 521; www.thelofthostel.com; ul Kapitan Diado Nikola 2a; dm/d/apt 16/40/80 lv) Adjacent to the Samovodska Charshiya Complex, this new hostel tucked into a side lane offers two dorms, a double and a small apartment. It's colourfully painted and has a spacious common room, and internet and laundry service are available. Call in advance as there's not always someone around.

**Nomads Hostel** (☎ 603 092; www.nomadshostel.com; ul Gurko 27; dm/d 18/25 lv) Another new and central budget place, Nomads offers all the same amenities as the other hostels and has a relaxing balcony with views. It arranges both day trips and evening jaunts, and has no fixed check-out time.

**Hotel Trapezitsa** (☎ 622 061; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; s/apt 28/54 lv) This very central place overlooking the river and town is starting to show its age

and a certain indifference, but is still good value. Rooms are small but clean. The ones away from the street have great views over the river and town.

**Kâshata Private Flats** (☎ 604 129; www.the-house.hit.bg; pl Slaveikov 4; 1-/2-person apt 35/50 lv, 4-person apt 80 lv) Why hit the hotels when you can hire your own flat? Kâshata (The House), centrally located off the main street, offers well-equipped and good quality self-contained apartments.

**Pink Bakery** (☎ 601 362; www.the-pink-bakery.com; ul Reservarska 5; d/apt 40/70 lv) Nestled in the lower section of Varosha, this offbeat guesthouse in an unmissable pink building is a friendly and relaxing place run by two Brits, with colourful, slightly camp décor and bedding. Bathrooms are shared, but modern. There's also a spacious self-contained apartment with air conditioning, satellite TV and bright furnishings.

**MIDRANGE**

**Hotel Kiev** (☎ 600 571; kiev@abv.bg; pl Velchova Zavera 4; s/d 50/75 lv; 📶) This central hotel with an imposing façade and old-world lobby bar has breezy, tastefully decorated rooms. There aren't a lot of extras, but management is friendly and helpful.

**Hotel Boliari** (☎ 606 002; www.boliarihotel.com; ul Ivanka Boteva 2; s/d/ste 66/88/99 lv) This unassuming new boutique hotel between the Church of Sts Konstantin & Helena and the fortress has attractive rooms with handsome wood furnishings. It has a small café at reception and is a friendly, quiet place.

**Hotel Bolyarski** (☎ 613 200; www.bolyarski.com; ul Stefan Stambolov 53a; s/d 70/120 lv, apt 180-220 lv; 📶) Eight years in the making, the new Bolyarski has a phenomenal location on the bluff on ul Stambolov, with views of the town and river from its long café patio and rooms. Its modern, well-kept rooms are pitched at business travellers, though if you don't mind having no view, the 40 lv singles are practically budget. You pay extra for the fitness centre, swimming pool and Jacuzzi, however, and the service can be hit-or-miss.

**Hotel-Mehana Gurko** (☎ 627 838; www.hotel-gurko.com; ul Gurko 33; s/d 80/110 lv; 📶) The spacious, air-conditioned rooms at this old town place are individually decorated and offer great views. The traditional restaurant attached offers good Bulgarian cuisine.

**Villa Tashkov** (☎ 635 801; www.tashkoff.com; ul Gurko 19; d from 80 lv, entire villa 200 lv) Call in advance for this gorgeous, centrally located villa, which

can be rented in part or in full. The rooms are fully equipped, and there's a daily cleaning service. Reception is at ul Stambolisky 13.

**Hotel Tsarevets** (☎ 601 885; ul Chitalistna 23; s/d 90/110 lv; 📶) Also close to the fortress, the Tsarevets delights with its friendly service and comfortable, well-kept rooms with, TVs, internet and minibars. Ask about multiday discounts.

**our pick Hotel Studio** (☎ 604 010; www.studiohotel-vt.com; ul Todor Lefterov 4; s 100-110 lv, d 130-160 lv) This chic new boutique hotel, run by suave Ivan Velchev (the 'man in black'), is characterised by understated, black-and-white décor with the occasional splash of red. It has an enviable location 25m from Tsarevets Fortress, and a drink on the rooftop patio offers views of the fortress, Arbanasi, Trapezitsa Hill, Sveta Gora Hill and the town of Târnovo – an unmatched panorama. The hotel's posh downstairs bar-restaurant (right) offers imaginative cuisine and minimalist cool.

**TOP END**

**Hotel Allegro** (☎ 602 332; www.veliko-tarnovo.net/allegro; ul Todor Svetoslav 15; s/d 82-95/109-123 lv; 📶) The new-town Allegro, located between Marno Pole Park and the Tourist Information Centre, is nevertheless only a 10-minute walk from the old town. It has friendly service and spotless rooms, some quite large, with all mod cons and modern art. There's a breezy garden restaurant as well.

**Grand Hotel Yantra** (☎ 600 607; www.yantrabg.com; ul Opalchanska 2; s/d/ste 98/138/170 lv) This opulent new place is one of Târnovo's smartest top-end destinations. Service is excellent and rooms are sumptuously decorated; some suites even have fireplaces. It lacks the intimacy of smaller places and attracts business conferences, though. There's also an art gallery and casino.

**Hotel Premier** (☎ 615 555; hotel.premier@abv.bg; ul Sava Penev 1; s/d 140/200 lv, ste 240-480 lv; 📶) For those craving the safety of internationally certified luxury, Târnovo's Hotel Premier (part of the Best Western chain) awaits. It's located on a side street near the post office, a 10-minute walk from the old town. Facilities include a pool, sauna, spa treatments and (they claim) Bulgaria's biggest Jacuzzi.

**Eating**

Veliko Târnovo has some good restaurants and cafés; for atmosphere, try those with terraces overlooking the river and gorge.

**Stratilat** (☎ 635 313; ul Rakovisky 11; mains 5-7 lv) The large outside terrace makes this a popular place for a coffee, light meal or dessert from the morning till night.

**Starata Mehana** (ul Stefan Stambolov; mains 5-8 lv) Another dramatic location is found here, with great views and traditional, good-value cooking.

**Hotel-Mehana Gurko** (☎ 627 838; ul Gurko 33; mains 5-8 lv) The traditional *mehana* of the Hotel Gurko (opposite) has traditional décor and hearty Bulgarian specialities.

**Ego Pizza & Grill** (☎ 601 804; ul Nezavisimost 17; mains 5-9 lv; 📶 9am-midnight) Located upstairs from Scream Dance Club, this spacious place has an outdoor balcony with excellent views. Massive salads, Bulgarian cuisine, Serbian mixed grills and more obscure Chinese and Mexican dishes are on offer. A second location, right beside the popular Pepy's Bar has a more snug bistro feel and friendly, gorgeous staff.

**our pick Shtastliivetsa** (☎ 600 656; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; mains 5-10 lv; 📶 11am-1am) Hands down the most popular place in town for both locals and foreigners, the 'Lucky Man' (as the impossible-to-pronounce name means in Bulgarian) has a great menu of inventive meat dishes, baked-pot specials, nourishing pizzas and (at lunchtime) delicious soups. It's good value, considering the high quality. The service is generally good, though sometimes comically formal.

**Restaurant Hotel Studio** (☎ 604 010; www.studiohotel-vt.com; ul Todor Lefterov 4; mains 7-12 lv; 📶 9am-11pm) This new gourmet eatery at the boutique Hotel Studio (left) has elegant black décor and a back-lit, well-equipped bar, winning you over even before the baked camembert in almond and wild berries sauce or Black Sea bluefish arrive. Dress up.

**Drinking**

**Shekerdzinita** (☎ 0898563490; ul Giorgi Momarchev 13; 📶 9am-6pm Tue-Sun) This lovely little café with traditional furnishings in the old market is the place to go for real Turkish coffee – appealingly prepared the old-school way, in a diminutive copper pot run across a basin of heated sand.

**Ulitsata** (☎ 603 252; ul Stefan Stambolov 79) To one side of the Hotel Trapezitsa, this is one of Târnovo's busiest and friendliest cafés, with nice views from the terrace.

**our pick Pepy's Bar** (☎ 603 041; pl Slaveikov; 📶 10am-3am) If you were an expat in Târnovo, Pepy's

might well be your local. The dark-lit, popular bar doesn't put on airs like the more studenty places; it's just a cosy, chilled-out nightclub with subdued style.

**City Pub** (☎ 637 824; ul Hristo Botev 15) This popular, big British-style pub near the post office and TIC is a bit gimmicky, but usually lively with local students.

**Café Aqua** (☎ 623 567; ul Nezavisimost 3) Lounge over a coffee and *slatka* (sweet) until late in the evening at this central café, which has a breezy balcony overlooking the gorge.

## Entertainment

Veliko Tàrnovo's nightlife is buzzing year-round; in summer, there's a big foreign presence, when the backpacker *internationale* descends, while the town's 20,000 vivacious university students flesh out the clubs during the rest of the year.

**Jack** (☎ 0887203016; ul Magistraka 5; ☎ 10pm-4am) This pumping student club for knavish lads and short-skirted girls is named for the American whiskey, and is especially popular on weekends with house music and dancing.

**Scream Dance Club** (☎ 0897938266; ul Nezavisimost 17; ☎ 10pm-4am) Another of Tàrnovo's popular clubs, Scream is slightly more tasteless but equally studenty.

**Deep Café Club** (☎ 321 645; ul Nezavisimost 23; ☎ 8am-1am) This small, eccentrically lit subterranean bar-verging on-club caters to a young crowd with hip-hop and house music.

**Bally** (☎ 0885565666; ul Hristo Botev 2; ☎ 8pm-5am) This new club playing hip-hop and techno has both its supporters and detractors. With its large central dance floor, it can seem empty unless there's a weekend crowd.

The latest Hollywood films are on at **Cinema Arena** (tickets 6 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) in the new shopping centre, Central Mall (right), which also has a nightclub, bowling alley and casino. (A taxi is the easiest way to get there.) In addition to the mall, the new town, little-visited by tourists, is where many students reside and thus also offers heavy-duty entertainment during term.

For a spot of theatre, try the **Konstantin Kisimov Dramatic Theatre** (☎ 623 526; ul Vasil Levski). The Tourist Information Centre (p171) can tell you what's on.

## Shopping

Roughly opposite the Hotel Bolyarski, ul Rakovski veers upwards from the main road, ul Stambolov. On and behind it is the

**Samovodska Charshiya Complex**, the town's historic centre of craftsmanship; blacksmiths, potters and gunsmiths, among other artisans, still practise their trades here. The numerous bookshops and purveyors of antiques, jewellery and art are also housed in appealing Bulgarian National Revival houses. It's a great place for shopping, or just a stroll, as is the equally appealing old residential quarter of Varosha just above it.

At the beginning of ul Rakovski, a prominent map signposts the name and location of each shop in the *charshiya*, in both Bulgarian and English. The following two are only a couple of the many unique shops around.

**Magazin za Manasta** (ul Giorgi Momarчев 14; ☎ 9am-7pm) You'll recognise this cosy shop from the sign out front reading 'hand-made jewelry', and the walls lined with brightly coloured glass and silver beads. Buy them by the piece, or choose from the many unique necklaces.

**Icons Krasimir Ivanov** (☎ 0885060544; cnr ul Rakovski & ul Kapitan Diado Nikola; icons 60-400 lv; ☎ 10am-7pm) Krasimir Ivanov has been painting icons since the fall of communism, when religious art was allowed again. His detailed ink sketches of old Tàrnovo (20 lv), displayed outside the shop are another excellent take-home memento. The shop doubles as Krasimir's workshop, so you can watch him painstakingly painting while you browse.

For camping, climbing, skiing and biking gear, you'll want to visit **Gorgona** (☎ 601 400; www.gorgona-shop.com; ul Zelenka 2; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat).

The eastside **Central Mall** (☎ 674 040; www.mallvt.eu; ul Oborishte 18; ☎ 10am-8pm) is Bulgaria's most modern shopping centre to be found outside of Sofia.

## Getting There & Away

### BUS

Two bus stations serve Veliko Tàrnovo, both out of the centre. **Pàtnicheski Prevozi bus station** (Zapad bus station; ☎ 640 908; ul Nikola Gabrovski 74) is about 4km from the centre and is the main terminus for buses from elsewhere in Bulgaria. Local buses 10, 12, 14, 70 and 110 go there, along ul Vasil Levski. There's also a **left-luggage office** (☎ 7.30am-4.30pm). From here, buses serve Gabrovo (3.50 lv, 40 minutes, half-hourly), as well as Elena (2 lv, 30 minutes, six daily), Kazanlak (5 lv, 2½ hours, five daily), Ruse (6 lv, two hours, eight daily), Sliven (4 lv, two hours, seven daily), Burgas (14 lv,

four hours, four daily) and Plovdiv (14 lv, four hours, four daily). Daily buses serve Troyan (4 lv, two hours), Karlovo (7 lv, four hours) and Pleven (6 lv, two hours).

The somewhat more central **Yug bus station** (☎ 620 014; ul Hristo Botev) has many daily buses to Sofia (11 lv, four hours) and the Black Sea cities of Varna (11 lv, four hours) and Burgas (14 lv, 3½ hours). From here, several daily buses also serve Shumen (5 lv, three hours).

Under the Hotel Etàr, **Etap Address** (☎ 630 564; ul Ivaylo 2) has hourly buses to Sofia (15 lv, 3½ hours) and Varna (15 lv, four hours), plus two daily buses to Dobrich (13 lv, four hours), one to Kavarna (15 lv, 4½ hours) via Albena and Balchik and one to Shumen (8 lv, two hours).

To reach Romania by bus, go first to Ruse, from where three daily minibuses make the three-hour trip to Bucharest.

## TRAIN

The **Veliko Tàrnovo train station** (☎ 620 065), 1.5km west of town, runs three daily trains to Plovdiv (10.10 lv, five hours) via Stara Zagora (4.80 lv, two hours). Trains also serve Sliven (7 lv, three hours, six daily), Burgas (11.40 lv, five hours, three daily), Varna (11.80 lv, five hours, three daily) and Sofia (12.80 lv, 4½ hours, six daily). There are five daily trains to Gabrovo (change at Tsareva Livada) and regular trains to Tàrnovo's other train station, at Gorna Oryakhovitsa. From the Veliko Tàrnovo station, buses 10, 12, 14, 70 and 110 go to the centre. A taxi from the station to the centre should cost around 3 lv to 5 lv.

**Gorna Oryakhovitsa train station** (☎ 826 118), 8.5km from town, is along the main line between Sofia and Varna and has daily services to/from Sofia, via Pleven, (10 lv, five hours, eight daily) and Varna (9.10 lv, four hours, three daily) and 11 trains to Ruse (6 lv, two hours). There are also six daily connections to Stara Zagora (7 lv, four hours), and 10 to Shumen (7 lv, four hours).

You can get to this station from Veliko Tàrnovo by catching a minibus from opposite the market along ul Vasil Levski, by taking bus 14 from the Pàtnicheski Prevozi bus station, or by bus 10 from the centre. Taxis cost about 8 lv to 9 lv.

## International

To reserve international or domestic tickets, visit **Rila Bureau** (☎ 622 042; ul Tsar Kaloyan 2a;

☎ 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri), located behind the Tourist Information Centre. A daily train to Bucharest (22.93 lv, six hours) in Romania leaves Veliko Tàrnovo train station at 10.42am, stopping at Gorna Oryakhovitsa and continuing north from there at 12.22pm. A night train from Tàrnovo goes to Istanbul, Turkey (35.85 lv, 62.32 lv with sleeper car, 11 hours) at 7.55pm. You can also reach Thessaloniki in northern Greece via an evening train from Gorna Oryakhovitsa (41.95 lv, 63.42 lv with sleeper car, 14 hours).

## Getting Around

Most people will find walking both sufficient and enjoyable for getting around in Veliko Tàrnovo. Taxis are good for zipping around the central areas – try **Toptaxi** (☎ 631 111; fares 1-3.30 lv) – but sometimes refuse to drive in the old quarters, especially Varosha, due to the narrowness of the streets. If staying in a hostel in such a neighbourhood, therefore, you're better off taking advantage of the free pick-up services offered. Hiring taxis (at fixed metered rates) for local destinations such as Arbanasi, or chartering them (for negotiable rates) to places further afield is more feasible.

For car rental, ask at the Tourist Information Centre for the best offers (usually around 40 lv per day, including insurance, but not petrol).

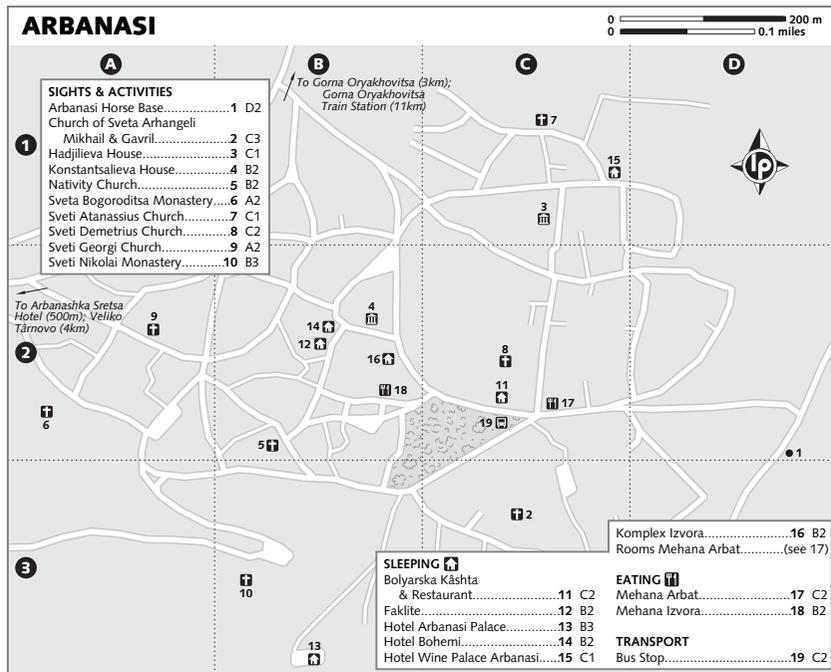
## AROUND VELIKO TÀRNOVO

### Arbanasi Арбанаси

☎ 062 / pop 1500

Just 4km from Veliko Tàrnovo, Arbanasi is a historic monastery-village with some lovely architecture, traditional accommodation and hearty cuisine, horseback riding and hiking. Although opulent villas for wealthy Sofians have gone up in recent years, Arbanasi is still far from being overrun, with a bucolic air and leafy surroundings. Nearly 90 churches, homes and monasteries here are state-protected cultural monuments.

Founded by Christians from Albania in the 15th century (medieval Albanians were often called 'Arvanauts'), Arbanasi enjoyed a bit of luck when Ottoman Sultan Süleyman I bequeathed it to a son-in-law in 1538, making it exempt from taxation. Local artisans and traders did business far and wide, with Greece, Russia and India, and the village became a summer getaway for the Ottoman elite. In 1798, however, Arbanasi was mostly destroyed by the infamous Turkish *kurdjali* gangs.



## ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Relaxing Arbanasi has plenty of open space and a network of nameless streets, though most of the action is centred on one or two on the central square, where a Unicredit Bulbank ATM machine also stands.

The Arbanasi municipal [website](http://www.arbanasi.org) ([www.arbanasi.org](http://www.arbanasi.org)) contains information about the town's history, accommodation and eating, and local activities.

## SIGHTS

Arbanasi's three major sites, two churches and one house-museum, are all covered by the same ticket (4 lv). Each operates from 9.30am to 6pm daily, though they're usually closed between 1 October and 31 March. Double-check first in Veliko Tărnovo with the **Museums Department** (☎ 062-349 460) before off-season visits. At any time of the year, you may also want to first get the book *Arbanasi: A Guide* (3 lv) at a bookstore in Tărnovo.

During the 16th and 17th centuries, benevolent Turkish rulers condoned church-building in Arbanasi. The village's oldest remaining church, the **Nativity Church**, boasts a stunning,

kaleidoscopic frescoed interior, with paintings (created between 1632 and 1649) covering every inch of space in the five chambers; the hand-carved central iconostasis is also magnificent. Over 3500 figures are depicted in some 2000 scenes throughout the church, which also boasts lavish wood iconostases created by eminent carvers from Tryavna.

The 16th-century **Church of Sveta Arhangelii Mikhail & Gavril**, built on the ruins of a medieval church, also contains impressive frescoes, including one from Thessaloniki in Greece and another from Bucharest in Romania. Since the interior is rather dark, these are best viewed on a sunny day. The wooden iconostases were also carved by experts from the Tryavna school of woodcarving.

The final major site, the gorgeous, 17th-century **Konstantsalieva House**, was later rebuilt in the Bulgarian National Revival style. It contains period furniture in the upstairs rooms, while the ground floor has a souvenir shop with embroidery and more for sale.

At the time of writing another unique site, the **Hadjiieva House**, was closed but scheduled to be re-opened soon, so check when you're

there. Other sites include the unignosted **Sveti Demetrius Church**, and the pretty **Sveti Atanasius Church**, probably built in 1667, which has a cemetery.

There are also three 17th-century working monasteries: **Sveti Georgi Church**, the **Sveta Bogoroditsa Monastery** (☎ 620 322) and the **Sveti Nikolai Monastery** (☎ 650 345). All are usually open.

## ACTIVITIES

The **Arbanasi Horse Base** (☎ 623 668), on the village's eastern edge, does guided horseback riding trips in the lush hills around Arbanasi. Phone to ask about current programmes and costs, or consult the Tourist Information Centre (p171) in Veliko Tărnovo. It also hosts a riding tournament each June.

## SLEEPING

Arbanasi is much quieter than Veliko Tărnovo, and its traditional guesthouses, and a few more lavish hotels, will appeal to those looking for peace and quiet. Some places close in winter. Private rooms are also available; ask at the shops at the bus stop or in the restaurants.

**Faklite** (☎ 604 496; s/d 20/32 lv) Faklite (the torches) offers huge and atmospheric rooms with bathroom in a traditional villa. The main house, not the one with modern-style rooms beyond the garden, is the place to be.

**Rooms Mehana Arbat** (☎ 631 811; s/d incl breakfast 35/45 lv) These new rooms offered by the central Mehana Arbat (right), just upstairs from the restaurant, have lovely doubles with weathered wood floors and traditional furnishings. Bathrooms are simple but modern.

**Arbanashka Sretna Hotel** (☎ 601 370; s/d 48/88 lv; ☎) This new guesthouse with cosy, traditional style rooms is set off on a small dirt drive just before the centre. There are good views from the on-site restaurant patio as well as a small swimming pool.

**Hotel Wine Palace Arbanasi** (☎ 630 176; s/d/st incl breakfast 48/68/108 lv; ☎) This expansive place, which has an outdoor pool and well-kept grounds, offers excellent value considering the luxury of the well-appointed rooms, which come with all modern conveniences and bathtubs. Many of the rooms have spacious balconies. As the name suggests, the restaurant includes a winery where numerous exemplary Bulgarian wines can be sampled.

**Bolyarska Káshta & Restaurant** (☎ 620 484; [www.boliarska.com](http://www.boliarska.com); s/d/apt incl breakfast 50/65/90 lv) Only metres from the square and bus stop, this hotel offers spacious rooms and a lovely garden. A fountain feeds terraced pools along the rooms, creating the soothing sound of gurgling water. The hotel overlooks the St Demetrius Church.

**Hotel Bohemi** (☎ 620 484; [www.arbanassiv.hit.bg](http://www.arbanassiv.hit.bg); d/apt 65/90 lv) Small but comfortable rooms are on offer at this established place in the centre. The large apartments' amenities include a crackling fireplace.

**Hotel Arbanasi Palace** (☎ 630 176; s/d/st 77-104/122-144/126-198 lv; ☎) Looking somewhat grey and battered on the outside, the Arbanasi Palace nevertheless has a five-star interior with a seemingly endless labyrinth of marble halls. The stunning view out over the valley towards Veliko Tărnovo from the restaurant balcony, and from many of the rooms, is no doubt what inspired its original creation – it was originally built as the grand residence of former communist leader Todor Zhivkov.

**Komplex Izvora** (☎ 601 205; [www.izvora.hit.bg](http://www.izvora.hit.bg); s/d 100/140 lv, ste 180-280 lv; ☎) The Izvora sprawls to include a hotel, *mehana* with garden setting and barbecue, swimming pool and pens of odour-bearing farm animals, which are fascinating for children. You're paying for accoutrements such as a spa centre, however, as the double rooms are just standard. However, the nice wood-floored suites are more aesthetically pleasing.

## EATING

**Mehana Izvora** (☎ 627 917; mains 6-8 lv) A 17th-century, well-decked-out residence houses this popular tavern. It also has a swimming pool and playground, and folk music is provided (at no extra cost) in the evening if there are enough customers.

**Mehana Arbat** (☎ 631 811; mains 6-9 lv) Probably the most atmospheric place in town, this cosy main-street *mehana* serves excellent grilled meats, both quick bites and specialities requiring 18 hours of slow roasting. There's also now a new upstairs VINO Bar for drinks in the evening.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

On ul Vasil Levski in Veliko Tărnovo, opposite the market, minibuses depart for Gorna Oryakhovitsa train station when full

(about every 30 minutes). Ask the driver if it's possible to detour through Arbanasi. If not, disembark at the turn-off to Arbanasi along the way, and walk (about 700m) to the village. A taxi from Veliko Târnovo costs about 5 lv to 6 lv one way. Taxis in Arbanasi will take you back.

### Preobrazhenski Monastery

**Preobrazhenski Monastir** (☎ 623 076), or the Monastery of the Transfiguration, is located high in a forest about 7km north of Veliko Târnovo. Originally built in 1360, it's Bulgaria's fourth largest monastery and offers fantastic views. Despite being destroyed by the Turks in the late 14th century, it was rebuilt in 1825, about 500m from the original site, but later damaged by landslides. To the sides of the main church you will see massive rocks that tumbled down the hill and miraculously just missed the building. The monastery's churches boast murals painted between 1849 and 1851 by the renowned Zahari Zograf. While the best are now in Veliko Târnovo's Archaeological Museum (p174), a restoration program now underway has brightened up the remaining age-blackened frescoes, making a visit here very worthwhile. You may also see (and hear!) the enormous barrels of fermenting plum brandy in the courtyard being made by the rascally monks.

Bus 10 from Veliko Târnovo goes past the monastery. It will leave you at a turn-off on the road headed to Ruse. From here, it's a shady, uphill 3km walk. A taxi from Veliko Târnovo costs about 6 lv one way.

### Emen ЕМЕН

The 3km-long **Emen Canyon**, along the Negovanka River, is the only one of its kind in Bulgaria. Some 25 hectares of land here exist as a protected reserve for species of butterflies, fish, birds and bats. The reserve also includes the 10m-high **Momin Skok Waterfall**, at its best in spring.

Hiking the **Negovanka Ecotrail**, which runs in a loop in and around the canyon, is the main attraction at Emen. The trail is signposted from Emen village. Veliko Târnovo's Tourist Information Office (p171) can provide more details and/or maps.

Emen village and the canyon are 25km west of Veliko Târnovo, and are accessible

by the bus from Veliko Târnovo to Pavlikeni, which leaves Târnovo's Pâtnicheski Prevozi bus station at 8.30am and 6pm.

### Nikopolis-ad-Istrum

#### Никополис-ад-Иструм

Built in AD 102 under Emperor Trajan, but destroyed by the Slavs in the late 6th century, this former Roman city has extensive **ruins** (admission 4 lv; ☎ 8am-6pm) that include streets, towers, gates, the city square and the town hall. While many local treasures were looted long ago, some of the best finds are housed in Veliko Târnovo's Archaeological Museum (p174); visiting both site and museum is thus recommended for archaeology buffs.

If driving from Veliko Târnovo, head north towards Ruse and take the signposted turn-off to the left (west) after about 20km. This access road, however, is rough in parts. By bus, take the same route (towards Ruse), and ask the driver to stop at the turn-off to Nikyup; from there it's a 4km signposted walk to the ruins. In high summer, check in advance to ensure the site will be open, as archaeological work is ongoing; either the tourist office in Veliko Târnovo (p171) or the relevant **authority** (☎ 062-624 474) can inform you.

### DRYANOVO MONASTERY

☎ 0676

Originally dating from the 12th century, this **monastery** (☎ 5253; admission free; ☎ 7am-8pm), tucked beneath limestone cliffs about 6km from the town of Dryanovo (*Dry-an-ovo*), has a turbulent history. It was alternately destroyed by the Turks and rebuilt by Bulgarians several times over a period of about 500 years. Like many other monasteries, it provided sanctuary to the revolutionary leader, Vasil Levski, and his men. Later, during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78), more than 100 locals made a valiant last stand against the Turks, for some nine days. The Turks eventually won out, burning the place down yet again. The villagers' hopeless bravery is commemorated with a **mausoleum** in the monastery grounds.

The monks of Dryanovo have a reputation for friendliness and are happy to chat with visitors. Accommodation (see opposite) is usually available, but call in advance just to be sure.

Inside the **Komplex Vodopadi** (opposite) is a **Historical Museum** (☎ 2097; admission 3 lv;

☎ 9am-noon & 12.30-3.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.45am-3.45pm Sat & Sun), devoted mostly to the 1876 April Uprising and the Russo-Turkish War. The macabre collection of skulls draws attention immediately. Downstairs are artefacts from nearby caves, including **Bacho Kiro**, and some icons.

From the bridge near the car park, a 400m path leads through lush forest to the 1200m-long **Bacho Kiro cave** (☎ 2332; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 10am-4pm Nov-Mar), inhabited during the Palaeolithic era. It is a long, well-lit cave, and guided tours are offered, though aren't really necessary.

Hikers will enjoy the **Dryanovo Ecotrail**, a well-marked, circular path that starts and finishes near the monastery. The hike takes about four hours, and passes through lush, hilly forests. To find the trailhead, ask at the **Bacho Kiro cave** or at the **Mehana Mecha Dupka**, which is in the woods just behind the monastery, about 50m from the start of the trail leading to the cave.

The **tourist office** (☎ 2106) in Dryanovo or the **Bacho Kiro Tourist Society** (☎ 2332) can arrange local rock-climbing and caving trips.

### Sleeping & Eating

Simple rooms are offered in the **monastery** (☎ 5253; per person with shared bathroom 10 lv).

**Komplex Vodopadi** (☎ 2314; d/apt 40/50 lv) This place, virtually attached to the monastery, offers several small but clean rooms. Many of them have balconies overlooking the monastery.

**Mehana Andyka** (☎ 2230; mains 5-9 lv; ☎ 9am-1am) This relaxing restaurant has a lovely wooded setting between cliffs, about 300m before the cave entrance, and does good grilled meats and salads.

### Getting There & Away

Buses travelling between Veliko Târnovo and Gabrovo can leave you at the turn-off to the monastery (4km south of Dryanovo), from where you'll have to walk the last 1.5km. Car parking costs 2 lv.

### TRYAVNA ТРЯВНА

☎ 0677 / pop 12,200

Once just a day trip and now a tourist draw, Tryavna (40km southwest of Veliko Târnovo) has been impressively renovated thanks to EU largesse. The National Revival-period homes, stone bridges and cobblestone

streets are all aesthetically appealing, as is the sight of the main church selectively floodlit at night. Tryavna is most famous for its craftsmanship, and particularly for the eminent Tryavna school of religious woodcarving that existed during Ottoman times. However, despite its plethora of exhibitions and churches, Tryavna has not become simply a museum town; a school for woodcarving still exists, attended by young Bulgarians eager to continue this important aspect of their national heritage.

### Orientation

The bus station and train station are 100m apart and west of ul Angel Kânchev, the main road running through the old town. Get local maps either at Tryavna train station or at shops (either on ul Angel Kânchev, or opposite the Hotel Tryavna on the main square). The town's few services, including an ATM and some restaurants, are located around this square.

### Information

**Bulgarian Post Bank** (Post Office Bldg, ul Angel Kânchev 22) The best place to change money; there's also an ATM.

**DCK Bank** (Municipal Bldg) ATM only, on the side of the municipality building.

**Internet Centre** (ul Angel Kânchev 15) The local internet café.

**Tourist office** (☎ 2247; www.tryavna.bg; ul Angel Kânchev 22; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) In the post office building; can help with bus and train schedules, and arrange private rooms.

### Sights

A two- to three-hour walking tour will suffice to see all of Tryavna's sights. From the bus station, head east (away from the train line) and then turn right along ul Angel Kânchev to reach the impressive **St Georgi Church** (ul Angel Kânchev 128; ☎ 7.30am-12.30pm & 2.30-5.30pm) on the left. Completed in 1852, it features some beautiful icons and carvings. Further on the right is the **Angel Kânchev House-Museum** (☎ 2278; ul Angel Kânchev 39; admission 2 lv; ☎ 8am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Mar). Built in 1805, it contains exhibits about revolutionary hero Kânchev, and the liberation of Tryavna during the Russo-Turkish War.

Walk over the bridge, past the shady park and head right (still along ul Angel Kânchev) to pl Kapitan Dyado Nikola. First built in 1814 in National Revival-period

## WOODCARVING

During the Bulgarian National Revival period, Tryavna became renowned for the quality and quantity of its woodcarvings, often intricately chiselled from local walnut, birch, poplar and oak trees. Many carvings from Tryavna were used to decorate monasteries in Gabrovo, Veliko Târnovo, Arbanasi and Rila, and carvers were sought after by builders and house owners as far away as Serbia, Turkey and modern-day Iran.

By the early 19th century, over 40 workshops in Tryavna were churning out wooden cradles, frames, icons, friezes, doors and crosses. Each design was individual, but most included the type of ornate and detailed flower motifs that became known as the Tryavna school of woodcarving. Some of the most beautiful exhibits include the 'sun ceiling' inside the Daskalov House in Tryavna, which is also home to the Museum of Woodcarving & Icon Painting (below).

In an attempt to resurrect the tradition, courses in the Tryavna school of woodcarving are offered to tourists. Courses for one/two/three days (six hours per day) cost 35/60/80 lv, and can be arranged through the tourist office (p183). Every even-numbered year, the school also hosts the International Woodcarving Competition. Details are available from the tourist office in Tryavna.

style, this large square is dominated by a **clock tower** (1844) that chimes loudly on the hour. Facing this square is **Staroto Shkolo**, the town's old school. Built in 1836, it's now been fully restored and houses the **Tryavna Museum School of Painting** (☎ 2517, 2039; adult /student 2/1 lv; ☎ 9am-7pm). Also overlooking the square is the slate-roofed **St Archangel Michael's Church** (admission free; ☎ 8am-4.30pm), Tryavna's oldest church, which is magically lit at night. Burnt down by the Turks but rebuilt in 1819, it boasts intricate Tryavna school woodcarvings. Its **Museum of Icons** (admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm) illustrates the history of Bulgarian icon painting.

Across the stone **Arch Bridge** (1844) is ul PR Slaveikov, one of Bulgaria's nicest cobblestone streets. On the left-hand side is **Daskalov House** (☎ 2166; ul PR Slaveikov 27a; adult /student 2/1 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, to 5pm Nov-Mar). Completed in 1808, this walled home with garden also contains the intriguing and unique **Museum of Woodcarving & Icon Painting**. It features some superb examples of the Tryavna school of woodcarving, as well as icons and antique copper implements.

Housed in a former chapel, Tryavna's second, larger **Museum of Icons** (☎ 3753; ul Breza 1; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-4.30pm summer, 10am-6pm winter) contains over 160 religious icons from the erstwhile collections of famous local families. The museum is beyond the train line, and signposted from ul PR Slaveikov.

Back on this street, the **Slaveikov House-Museum** (☎ 2166; ul PR Slaveikov 50; admission 2 lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-6pm Wed-Sun) is dedicated to Petko Slaveikov and his son Pencho, re-

nowned poets who lived here for many years. Further down on the left is the **Summer Garden Kalinchev House** (☎ 3694; ul PR Slaveikov 45; admission 1.50 lv; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri). This house, built in 1830, features a charming courtyard **café** (☎ 8am-11pm) and contains (but is not currently exhibiting) 500 works by Bulgarian artists, including Kalinchev. More paintings, drawings and sculptures are displayed next door at the **Ivan Kolev House** (☎ 3777; ul PR Slaveikov 47; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri).

## Sleeping

Along the first 200m of ul Angel Kânchev after the bus station you will see offers of rooms for rent. The tourist office can also arrange private rooms (including in the old town) for about 20 lv to 25 lv per person, including breakfast.

**Hotel Tigara** (☎ 2469; ul D Gorov 7a; s/d 25/30 lv) The Tiger Hotel is a friendly place near the Hotel Tryavna. This family-run hotel is hospitable, and the best value in town. The best of the clean and comfortable rooms are the newer ones at the back. Breakfast costs 4 lv.

**Hotel Tryavna** (☎ 3448; fax 2598; ul Angel Kânchev 46; s/d 35/50 lv) This refurbished large hotel has an excellent location and very modern, though fairly standard, accommodation aimed at the business traveller market. There are two restaurants, a fitness centre and a garden café.

**Komplex Brâshlyan** (☎ 3019; bungalows 36 lv, d 40-90 lv) The Brâshlyan overlooks the town from a shady spot north of the centre. The bigger rooms have huge leather sofas and balconies,

and there's a restaurant and outdoor deck for evening drinks. Cross the tracks past the old bridge, and head up and right.

**Zograf Inn** (☎ 4970/80; zograf@mbx.dgys.bg; ul PR Slaveikov 1; s/d/apt 38/56/90 lv; ☎ ) In the heart of historic Tryavna, the Zograf occupies an old building complete with a traditional *mehana*. The rooms are spotless and good value, though more indifferently modern than the building itself would lead you to expect. Internet provided is cable. Note rates rise slightly on weekends.

**Hotel Seasons** (☎ 2285; www.tryavna.bg/web/seasons; ul Kâncho Skorchev 11; s/d/ste 38/56/90 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎ ) Tryavna's luxury option includes a large outdoor pool, sauna and Jacuzzi. The breezy, spacious rooms are the best in town, though you'll need to get up there by car to beat the steep hill. The professional staff organise walking tours in the nearby hills for guests.

**Hotel Family** (☎ /fax 4691; ul Angel Kânchev 40; s/d 40/55 lv) Clean and smart rooms are found at this family-run place, most with balconies.

**Hotel Ralitsa** (☎ 2262; fax 2402; hotelralica@mbx.dgys.bg; ul Kaletso; s/d incl breakfast 40/60 lv) This three-star place is south of town, set amidst hills and best reached by taxi or private car. The rooms are spacious, and most doubles feature a balcony with great views. A good restaurant is attached.

## Eating & Drinking

**Gostilitsa** (ul PR Slaveikov 35; mains 5-7 lv) Almost diagonally opposite the Starata Loza, this classy place is uninvitingly located behind a wooden door. The service is excellent, the meals are not too expensive and the menu is in English.

**Zograf Mehana** (ul PR Slaveikov 1; mains 5-8 lv) The traditional-style restaurant in the hotel of the same name is just off the main square and serves a reliable range of Bulgarian staples.

**Restaurant Tryavienski Kut** (☎ 2033; ul Angel Kânchev; mains 5-8 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) This atmospheric restaurant in an imposing National Revival-style house has worn wooden floors and carved ceilings, and a good range of homemade Bulgarian cooking.

**Starata Loza** (☎ 4501; ul PR Slaveikov 44; mains 6-12 lv) The Old Vine features eccentric traditional décor (wood carvings on the interior, wine casks sticking out of the walls) and has a big menu of inventive Bulgarian fare, plus 27 kinds of *rakia* (fruit brandy). The specials,

such as pork stuffed with onions, sausage, mushrooms and walnut (11 lv) are expensive, but worth it. It's on the cobblestone street opposite the entrance to Daskalov House.

**Slatkarnitsa Enitsa** (☎ 6789; ul PR Slaveikov 25; ☎ 9am-9pm) There are tasty cakes and a corner for kids at this local sweet shop in the middle of town.

**Bar Kokoracia** (☎ 6811; ul Han Asparuh 1; ☎ 6pm-2am weekdays, to 4am weekends) This cool place with red paper lanterns and house music is the best watering hole in town.

## Getting There & Away

Most public transport to Tryavna goes via Gabrovo; frequent minibuses connect the two (2 lv, 30 minutes). From other points of origin, you'll need to connect in Gabrovo. By train, Tryavna is along a spur track, and has nine passenger trains daily (3 lv, 50 minutes). It's one of the closest stops to Veliko Târnovo and thus easy to see before or after visiting that town.

## GABROVO ГАБРОВО

☎ 066 / pop 64,340

A long and somewhat dusty town on the north-south road that crosses the Stara Planina, Gabrovo is not particularly remarkable in itself, but it is close to intriguing places, such as the artisans' village of Etâr, and has several local hiking opportunities. Its natives have an amusing old reputation for miserliness that makes them the butt of numerous jokes (they invented the one stotinka coin, says one). Despite the dig, Gabrovo's good-natured citizens have taken the initiative by creating a museum of humour; they also organise a biennial festival dedicated to the comic self-deprecation they've mastered.

The *Gabrovo* map, published by Domino and available in town, details 10 mountain-bike routes (ranging from 9km to 58km), which pass local villages, monasteries and ancient ruins. These trails are also excellent for hiking (see the boxed text, p188).

## Information

Foreign exchange offices and ATMs are on ul Radetska.

**Bulgarka Natural Park Directorate** (☎ 808 857; www.ppbulgarka.nug.bg; ul Minzuhar 1) Provides information on hiking opportunities in Bulgarka Natural Park.

**Internet Era** (ul Skobelevska)

**Matrix Internet Club** (Hotel Balkan complex, ul Emanuil Manolov 14)

**Tourist office** (☎ /fax 828 483; did@globcom.net; pl Vŭzhrazhdane; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Provides brochures and general info, arranges private accommodation rooms, and can rent mountain bikes and advise about mountain-bike routes and hiking trails.

**Sights**

Certainly one of Bulgaria's more unusual museums is the **House of Humour & Satire** (☎ 807 228; www.humorhouse.bg; ul Bryanska 68; adult/student/child 4/2/2 lv, guided tour 6 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm summer, 9am-6pm Mon-Sat winter). This huge, ugly building has four floors, but ideas relating to humour run out by the 2nd floor – a fact that's funny in itself.



The upper floors contain unrelated art and fascinating masks from around the world. Most items are labelled in English; tours are in English, French or German.

There's a small number of **National Revival-period homes** on the eastern side of town, immediately behind the dominant (but rarely open) **Sveta Troitsa Church**. If you want to fill in some time, the quaint **Sveta Bogoroditsa Church** (ul Dyustabanov) is mildly interesting. The **Museum of Education** (☎ 804 071; ul Aprilovska 13) is accessible through the stunning courtyard in the Aprilov School. Also worth a peek is the **art gallery** (ul Sv Kiril i Metodii).

**Festivals & Events**

In May during odd-numbered years, Gabrovo hosts the **Biennial Festival of International Humour & Satire**, part of the annual **May Festivities of Culture**.

Other festivals include the **Balkan Youth Festival** in August and the **Days of Chamber Music** in September.

**Sleeping & Eating**

Like the town itself, accommodation in Gabrovo is neither here nor there. Considering the superior options in nearby Tryavna (p183) and Etâr (opposite), there's no real need to linger here. However, if you'd like to stay over, the tourist office can find private rooms (20 lv to 25 lv per person including breakfast).

**Hotel Balkan** (☎ 801 911; fax 801 057; ul Emanuil Manolov 14; s/d/ste 80/90/110 lv; P) This old main-stay has been admirably modernised, offering

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clean but unexciting rooms that are still better than many provincial hotels.

**Tri Lovetsa** (ul Emanuil Manolov 14; mains 5-7 lv) This tavern across from the Hotel Balkan does good traditional-style Bulgarian specialities, and has a breezy terrace for summer dining.

**Gusto Pizza & Grill** (mains 5-8 lv) This place inside the Hotel Balkan does decent Italian and Bulgarian food as well as pizza.

Old Gabrovo, on the eastern side of the River Yantra, has several restaurants and cafés, including **Restaurant Cafe VMRO** (mains 3-5 lv) and the more expensive **Strannopriemnitsa Inn** (mains 6-9 lv). Cafés line ul Dyustabanov and the foot-bridge along ul Aprilovska.

**Getting There & Away**

From the **bus station** (☎ 805 566; ul Stefan Karadzha) three daily buses serve Varna, Sliven, Burgas, Stara Zagora (8 lv, two hours) and Plovdiv (10 lv, three hours). Five or six daily buses go to Pleven, and there's a service to Sofia (9 lv, 3½ hours, daily). Buses also leave hourly for Tryavna and Veliko Târnovo (via the Dryanovo Monastery; 4 lv, one hour), crossing the mountains at Shipka Pass for Shipka village (2 lv, 50 minutes) and Kazanlák (5 lv, 1½ hours).

The **train station** (☎ 827 127; pl Garov) has trains on a spur track of the Veliko Târnovo-Kazanlák line. Services to both towns are infrequent, however.

**ETÂR ЕТЪР**

☎ 066

This complex of traditional artisans just 8km southeast of Gabrovo is a fun place for shopping, or just wandering and watching the craftsmen at work. It also offers near hiking. Cumulatively known as the **Etâr Ethnographic Village Museum** (☎ 801 831; www.etar.hit.bg; admission 7 lv; ☎ 8.30am-6pm), the market complex contains nearly 50 shops and workshops clustered along narrow lanes. It's set all by itself in a 7-hectare, tree-lined spot along the Gabrovo-Shipka road. Etâr's 19th-century National Revival-period style buildings house the workshops of bakers, cartwrights, cobblers, furriers, glass workers, hatters, jewellers, leather workers, millers, potters, weavers and more. True, it's all a bit precious, but there are quality goods produced, and if you're looking to take home a memento of bygone days in the Balkans, you could do worse than to shop at Etâr. Intriguingly, some of the workshops are powered by water from a stream running through the complex.

Enter the complex either on the northern side (near the Hotel Strannopriemnitsa), at the central administration building, or on the far southern side, near the large car park. A multi-entry, one-day ticket is usually required, and guided tours (in English, French or German) are available for another 7 lv per person (minimum of five people).

**Fair Day** (14 October) features traditional dance and music, played on instruments such as locally-made *kavals* (wooden flutes).

Domino's **Gabrovo** map (available in Gabrovo and sometimes elsewhere) includes a detailed Etâr map, though it's not really necessary as wandering aimlessly is part of the fun here.

Besides the market, there's also excellent **hiking** to be had in the lush, hilly forests around Etâr. A large map standing opposite the entrance to the ethnographic village details some 15 different trails through the nearby **Bulgarka Natural Park**, plus the time required to hike them. Some trails can be done as day hikes, allowing you to park at Etâr and return there afterwards. However, those planning more extensive hikes that involve sleeping in mountain huts should first consult the **Bulgarka Natural Park Directorate** (☎ 808 857; www.ppbulgarka.nug.bg; ul Minzuhar 1) in Gabrovo.

**Sleeping**

**Hotel Strannopriemnitsa** (☎ 801 831; s/d incl breakfast 36/60 lv) At the northern (Gabrovo) end of the complex, this hotel is decent value, though singles are tiny. The doubles have balconies with views (of the less interesting part of the complex).

**Hotel Perla** (☎ 801 984; d 42 lv) This friendly place offers the best value around, with spacious rooms that boast shiny bathrooms and balconies. Breakfast is 3 lv extra.

**Eating**

**Restaurant Strannopriemnitsa** (mains 6-8 lv) Part of the Hotel Strannopriemnitsa, this hunting lodge-style *mehana* (replete with wall-mounted deer antlers) has better décor than food. The service is good, however, and the outdoor tables overlook the grass and trees.

**Renaissance Tavern** (mains 7-10 lv) Inevitably, due to its location within the complex, the Renaissance charges more than most village restaurants, but the food is good and the setting enhances the overall Etâr experience.

### HIKING IN THE STARA PLANINA

With an average height of little more than 700m, the Stara Planina (Old Mountain) range is not high, particularly compared with the Rila and Pirin Mountains. Nonetheless it is vast, covering 11,500 sq km (about 10% of Bulgaria) and, at close to 550km long, it extends almost the entire length of the country. Nearly 30 peaks are over 2000m high and the mountains feed one-third of Bulgaria's major rivers. The highest point is Mt Botev (2376m), north of Karlovo.

*The Mountains of Bulgaria* by Julian Perry describes the strenuous 25-day (650km to 700km) trek across the entire range. This trek – which starts at Berkovitsa, near the border with Serbia, and finishes at Emine Cape, about 20km northeast of Nesebăr on the Black Sea coast – is part of the trans-European E3 trek. The text in Perry's book is detailed, but the maps are poor, so buy the *Stara Planina* map, published by Kartografia and available at bookshops in Sofia. The *Troyan Balkan* map, available from the tourist office in Gabrovo (p186), is detailed, but specific to the Troyan and Apriltsi regions.

Some of the more interesting hikes along marked trails:

**Cherni Osēm to Hizha Ambaritsa** Four hours.

**Dryanovo Ecotrail** Four hours; see p183.

**Etăr to Sokolski Monastery** One hour, then continue to Shipka Pass (extra two to three hours – steep).

**Gabrovo to Hizha Uzana** Four hours.

**Karlovo to Hizha Hubavets** Two hours, or continue to Hizha Vasil Levski (another two to three hours) and Mt Botev (further two to three hours).

**Shipka Monastery to Shipka Pass** Two hours.

**Sliven to Hizha Karandila** Three hours.

The complex's little bakery sells basic take-away food, such as glazed *simit* buns (a local speciality) and cheese pies, while the *sladkarnitsa* (sweet shop) offers a tempting and very colourful range of traditional sweets, including *lokum* (Turkish delight) and halvas.

### Getting There & Away

From Gabrovo, take buses 1, 7 or 8 from ul Aprilov (2 lv, 15 minutes). Alternatively, catch the hourly Gabrovo–Kazanlāk bus, and bail at the turn-off; from here, walk 2km to reach Etăr. A taxi from Gabrovo costs about 7 lv one way. From Etăr, a taxi to Tryavna (about 20 lv) saves the trouble of bussing via Gabrovo. If you're driving, Etăr can also be done as a day trip from Veliko Tărnovo, Arbanasi or Dryanovo (among other places).

### LOVECH ЛОВЕЧ

☎ 068 / pop 41,050

Popular with weekenders but less visited by foreign travellers, Lovech is a quiet, well-restored traditional village along the Osēm River, 35km south of Pleven. In the old quarter of Varosha, over 150 National Revival-period structures have been restored, and the covered bridge over the river is the photogenic symbol of the town.

Lovech was significant as a military outpost and trade centre during the Thracian and Roman eras, and again during the Second Bulgarian Empire. During the Ottoman occupation, however, it would reach its peak, though precariously playing with fire as the surreptitious headquarters of the Bulgarian Central Revolutionary Committee during the mid-19th century.

### Orientation & Information

The adjacent bus and train stations are far enough from the centre to dissuade walking. Either take a taxi or walk along ul Tsocho Shishkov, veer to the right and follow the signs to the *centrum*. At the road's end, turn left along ul Bulgaria to reach the modern town, where the banks, foreign exchange offices and post office surround the main square, pl Dimitrov. Alternatively, to reach the old town, turn right past colourful, renovated buildings, and the Hotel Lovech, to the covered footbridge and nearby vehicle bridge.

### Sights

Just past the Hotel Lovech is the **pokritiyat most** (covered footbridge) – the Balkans' only such structure. Built in 1872, and completely restored twice since, it once again features its original wooden design. Arts and crafts shops,

as well as cafés, are found within. Passing the square beyond the bridge brings you to the **Art Gallery** (☎ 23 937; ul Vasil Levski 9; admission free; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Mon–Sat), with works by local and other Bulgarian artists exhibited.

Extensive ruins of the **Hisar Fortress** (admission free; ☎ 8am–6pm) are visible from all over the old town. Here the treaty with the Turks that led to the creation of the Second Bulgarian Empire was signed. There are great views from the fortress, which is fun to explore. From Varosha, it's a 10- to 15-minute uphill walk.

From near the art gallery, follow the cobblestoned ul Hristo Ivanov Golemia uphill about 100m to the **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 27 720; ul Hristo Ivanov Golemia; admission 3 lv; ☎ 8am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Sat). The two mid-19th-century buildings contain fascinating exhibits and period furniture, plus a cellar full of wine-making equipment. Leaflets with explanations in English, French or German are available.

About 50m further up, the **Vasil Levski Museum** (☎ 27 990; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) contains extensive displays about the revered revolutionary. Another 50m uphill is the renovated Byzantine **Sveta Bogoroditsa Church**, which is not always open.

From the church, follow the steps past more renovated National Revival homes leading to **Stratesh Hill**, where lilacs blossom and a stern **Vasil Levski statue** stands.

### Sleeping

**Hotel Tsariana** (☎ 600 995; tsariana@mbx.digsys.bg; pl Todor Kirkov 10; s/d 24/36 lv) The refurbished Tsariana on Varosha's square has good rates and fine, though not terribly atmospheric, rooms.

**Hotel Varosha 2003** (☎ 22 277; ul Ivan Drasov 23; s/d /ste/apt incl breakfast 30/40/50/60 lv; ☎) This recently renovated hotel on the river is very popular, and deservedly so. Its five spacious and well-equipped rooms lend a feeling of cosiness, enhanced by the hospitality of the owners, who serve breakfast in the garden and offer nourishing evening meals.

**Hotel Lovech** (☎ 604 717; ul Tărgovska 12; s/d 30/46 lv) In Lovech centre by the footbridge, this old standby has been admirably renovated, and is a well-run and friendly place.

**Hotel Oasis** (☎ 26 239; ul NV Drasov 17; s/d 30/50 lv) Another riverfront hotel, the well-furnished Oasis is signposted 100m from the vehicle bridge. A decent restaurant, often featuring live music, is attached.

### Eating

**Mehana Gallereya** (ul Vasil Levski; mains 4–7 lv) Located beside the eponymous Art Gallery, this *mehana* features a large courtyard, good service and very tasty food.

**Mehana Billaya** (ul Mami Poplukanov; mains 5–8 lv) Up the cobbled street from the Gallereya, the Billaya is equally atmospheric, if you don't mind the loud live music during the evenings.

Cafés and brasseries are found on pl Todor Kirkov in Varosha. A popular new watering hole, Power's Irish Pub, is located near the covered bridge.

### Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 603 618), hourly buses serve Troyan (4 lv, 45 minutes) from 7am to 7pm. Three daily buses serve Burgas (22 lv, six hours), Sliven (19 lv, four to five hours), Teteven (6 lv, 1½ hours) and Veliko Tărnovo (7 lv, two hours); more frequent buses cross the Stara Planina to Shipka (10 lv, 2½ hours, four daily) and Kazanlāk (12 lv, 3½ hours, four daily). Buses also leave hourly for Pleven (5 lv, one hour). Daily buses serve Sofia (14 lv, three hours, six daily), and one or two daily buses serve Vratsa (11 lv, three hours) in northern Bulgaria, via Cherven Bryag.

From the **train station** (☎ 634 935), three daily trains serve both Troyan (2.40 lv, one hour) and Levski (2.80 lv, 1 hour); from the latter, change for Sofia and the important railway hub of Gorna Oryakhovitsa (to get to Veliko Tărnovo, among other places).

### TROYAN ТРОЯН

☎ 0670 / pop 23,100

Troyan, associated mostly with its famous nearby monastery, is a laid-back, slightly faded town with crisp, clean mountain air. The grand, Soviet-era main square has a relaxed atmosphere and several well-frequented cafés. There's also a notable Pomak Muslim population. Although there's not much else to the place, it makes a good base for seeing the Troyan Monastery, Oreshak, Lovech and Karlovo. Troyan's also close to some excellent Stara Planina hiking paths.

Millennia ago, the Thracians first made Troyan strategically significant. Much later, during the Bulgarian National Revival period, it became famous for woodcarving, metalwork and particularly pottery. Examples of these crafts can be admired at the charming museum in Troyan, or bought at Oreshak.

## Orientation

From the bus and train stations, cross the Bely Osâm River by walking 300m over the footbridge along ul Zahari Stoyanov to reach the centre. From here, turn right and walk along the mall, ul General Kartsov, to Troyan's main square, pl Vûzhrazhdane. The narrow main road, ul Vasil Levski, starts north of the square and hugs the river.

## Information

The Troyan **tourist office** (☎ 35 064; infotroyan@yahoo.com; ul Vasil Levski 133; ☎ 8am-8pm summer, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri winter) can find private accommodation, provide maps, and arrange activities, such as horse riding, as well as car rental from about 40 lv per day.

## Sights

The impressive **Museum of Folk Craft & Applied Arts** (☎ 62 063; pl Vûzhrazhdane; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) by the bridge comprises 10 halls exhibiting local textiles, woodcarving, metalwork, weaving, pottery and ceramics, as well as some archaeological artefacts. The adjoining **History Museum**, included in the admission cost, is also worth a look.

## Activities

**Horse riding** (15 lv per person per hour) at local villages can be arranged by the tourist centre, which also assists with renting **mountain bikes** (per hour/day 1/8 lv); there are five designated mountain-bike routes, including to Troyan Monastery (right) and the nearby town of Chiflik. Guides (40 lv per day), who speak French, German or English, are available for local tours and **hikes**.

## Sleeping & Eating

The tourist office can arrange rooms in private homes in Troyan as well as in nearby villages, such as Oreshak (opposite), for about 15 lv per person, usually with breakfast. It also offers apartments in central Troyan with kitchen facilities, sitting room and bathroom (40 lv to 50 lv per double).

**Hotel Panorama** (☎ 622 930; hotelpanoramatr@mail.bg; Park Kâpincho; s/d 30/40 lv) The renovated Panorama, located in the hillside park above town, offers clean and decent rooms in a relaxed setting. Taxis to the hotel cost about 2 lv from the bus station or town centre.

**Hotel Nunki** (☎ 622 160; ul Minko Radkovski) Under renovation at the time of research

(but due to re-open soon), the rooms here promise to be large, quiet and traditionally furnished, with good, modern bathrooms. The hotel's restaurant offers good value and tasty food. The Nunki is at the start of the bridge (from where the road leads to Troyan Monastery), about 100m across from the tourist office.

**Troyan Plaza Hotel** (☎ 64 399; www.troyanplaza.com; ul PR Slaveykov 54; s/d/ste incl breakfast 70/90/110 lv; ☎ (P) (Q)) Troyan's classiest place, the four-star Troyan Plaza has all the expected amenities, including two restaurants and a spa centre. It can arrange activities such as horse-riding, archery and shooting.

**Café Antik** (☎ 60 910; Ploshtad Vûzhrazhdane; mains 7-12 lv; ☎ 7am-midnight) This café-restaurant, located behind the folk museum and with relaxing views of the river, is a good bet for coffee on the terrace when it's warm out, or a shot of the very strong Troyan brandy when it's cold. It also does some inventive (though relatively expensive) meat dishes.

A couple of cafés and pizza places are also found on the corner of ul Vasil Levski and pl Vûzhrazhdane.

## Getting There & Away

From the Troyan **bus station** (☎ 62 172), one daily bus serves Sofia (7 lv, three hours), at 2pm; buses passing through Lovech (2 lv, 45 minutes, hourly) have immediate connections to Pleven. Three daily buses serve Chiflik (2.60 lv, 50 minutes). For Troyan Monastery, take the hourly bus for Cherny Osâm and ask to disembark at the gates (the bus goes right past). Troyan is at the end of a spur track south of Lovech, complicating travel by train.

## AROUND TROYAN

### Troyan Monastery

Only 10km southeast of Troyan is Bulgaria's third-largest **monastery** (admission free, photos 5 lv, video 15 lv; ☎ 6am-10pm), after Rila (p117) and Bachkovo (p153). Troyan stands out for its powerful and searching frescoes, painted by Bulgarian master Zahari Zograf, regarded as the leading mural artist of the Bulgarian National Revival period. One of the highlights of central Bulgaria, it can nevertheless be seen in an hour or two.

Some of this 16th-century monastery survived numerous attacks by the Turks between the 16th and 18th centuries, but most of to-

day's monastery dates to 1835. All of the striking murals inside the **Church of the Holy Virgin** were painted in the 1840s by Zahari Zograf. The church is poorly lit, except for the rows of candles lit mostly by devout old ladies visiting, so it's hard to see the detail of the frescoes inside, though restoration work to brighten them up is happily underway. The very best of Zograf's frescoes, however, are outside on the back wall. They depict Judgment Day, the apocalypse and hell, with the seven-headed fire-breathing dragon and demonic torture of sinners in hell aptly illustrating the vivid old Bulgarian ecclesiastical imagination.

The monastery is also renowned for its hand-carved wood altar and iconostasis, crafted in the mid-19th century by master carvers from Tryavna. The highlight for most, though, is the legendary Three-Handed Holy Virgin, only seen in public during the annual monastery celebrations on **Virgin Mary's Day** (15 August).

The 19th-century revolutionary leader, Vasil Levski, formed and trained insurgents at the monastery and urged the monks themselves to take up arms against the Turks in 1876. This history is highlighted in the small, separate **museum** (admission 4 lv) on the 3rd floor. The museum door is usually locked, but staff at the reception office inside the gate can open it.

Troyan Monastery is not as touristy as famous Rila Monastery (p117), though it's getting there, and several cafés, restaurants, souvenir shops and art galleries are gathered around it.

Monk Nektarii at the **reception office** (☎ 0896668015) handles room bookings. Rooms are basic but expensive (doubles 60 lv), reflecting the monastery's increasing popularity, so book ahead.

**Monastirska Bara** (☎ 0888798591; mains 2-5 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) is a decent and cheap *mehana* next to the monastery. Service can be a bit rough, though, and the modern Bulgarian pop playing doesn't really enhance the hallowed atmosphere of the monastery.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

Every hour, a bus between Troyan and Cherni Osâm stops at the monastery gates. A taxi from central Troyan to the monastery costs about 7 lv for a one-way trip. Most taxi drivers will agree to return in an hour or two to take you back to Troyan.

## Oreshak ОРЕШАК

Only 6km southeast of Troyan is Oreshak, home of the **National Fair and Exhibition of Arts & Crafts Complex** (☎ 06952-2317; ☎ 8am-6pm Tue-Sun). This complex displays and sells embroidery, pottery, ceramics, weaving, woodcarving and metalwork. It's the best place in the Stara Planina region for buying authentic, locally made souvenirs at reasonable prices. The week-long annual fair in mid-August is held at the complex. The village bubbles over again during the **Festival of the Plums and Plum Brandy** (late September).

Oreshak offers an alternative, and more scenic, accommodation option to Troyan, and is not far (4km) by bus or on foot from the Troyan Monastery. The tourist office in Troyan (see opposite) can arrange private rooms for about 20 lv per person including breakfast. Some of these private homes also can cook up large servings of traditional meals, though at additional cost.

An hourly bus (2 lv, 20 minutes) leaves Troyan bus station for Cherni Osâm, and stops at Oreshak and the Troyan Monastery.

## KOPRIVSHITSA КОПРИВЩИЦА

☎ 07184 / pop 2900

This unique museum-village, nestled in wooded hills between Karlovo and Sofia, is a perfectly – and deliberately – preserved hamlet filled with Bulgarian National Revival-period architecture, cobblestone streets, and bridges that arc gently over a lovely brook. Nearly 400 buildings of architectural and historical significance are protected by government decree, some of them restored churches and house-museums containing fascinating collections of décor and implements from yesteryear.

Because much of Koprivshitsa (Ko-privshiti-tsa) is filled with rambling, overgrown lanes, it's also a very safe and fun place for children to scamper around in. Some of the traditional homes function as guesthouses or restaurants, most loaded with traditional ambience, making Koprivshitsa a romantic getaway, too. And, while the inevitable busloads of tour groups add to the gentrified sense of being in a giant open-air museum, the muddiness of the lanes after the rain, and the garrulous, bemused old locals keep Koprivshitsa from being too precious for its own good.

## History

Koprivshitsa was first settled at the end of the 14th century by Bulgarians of various social stations fleeing the Turkish invasion of Veliko Tŕrnovo. Sheep, cattle and goat herding developed the local economy, and a wealthy merchant class arose. Sacked by brigands in 1793, 1804 and 1809, Koprivshitsa was rebuilt during the mid-19th century. The population subsequently reached about 12,000 – thus becoming almost as big as Sofia was at the time.

Koprivshitsa is most famous in Bulgarian history, however, as the place where Todor Kableshev (or Georgi Tihanek, according to some sources) proclaimed the national uprising against the Turks on 20 April 1876, from the tiny bridge now known as the Kalachev Bridge (also called Kableshev Bridge), itself dating from 1813. This noble, if somewhat foolhardy, event has lent its name to the village's main square, dominated by the 1876 April Uprising Mausoleum.

After 1878 and independence from the Turks, many of Koprivshitsa's merchants and intellectuals left their mountain redoubts for the cities, leaving the village essentially unchanged to this day. In 1952, the communist Bulgarian government declared the village a town-museum, and later, in 1971, a 'historical reserve'.

## Orientation

From the bus stop, walk along the river (keeping it on your right) to reach the main square, pl 20 April, which houses the Tourist Information Centre. Most of the historical sites and museums are in the small streets above the square.

## Information

**DSK Bank** (next to the bus stop) is the town's only bank. It has an ATM and money exchange. There is an OBB Bank ATM right off the main square, next to the Mehana 20 April on ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev. The post office and telephone centre are located across from the town hall on ul Lyuben Karavelov.

### Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev Cultural Centre

(☎ 2034; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 78) Information on local festivals or cultural events is available here, or at the tourist office.

**Heroes Internet Club** (ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev; per hr 1.50 lv; ☎ 9am-midnight)

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ /fax 2191; www.koprivshitsa.info; pl 20 April; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm) This very helpful and friendly centre, a small maroon building on the main square, provides local information and can organise private accommodation.

## Sights

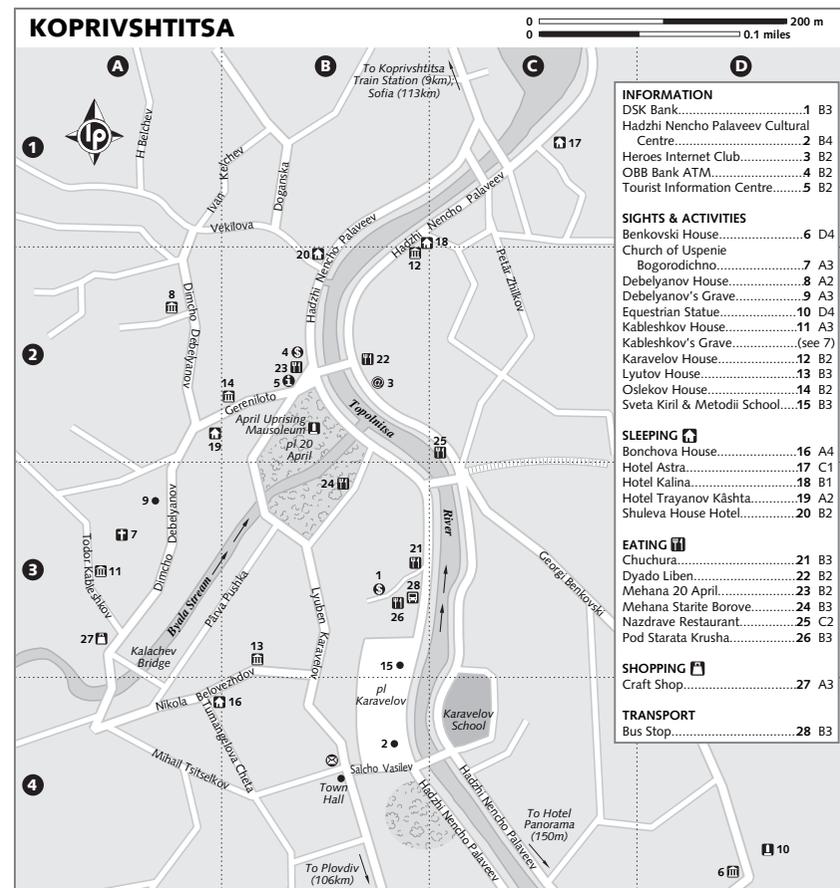
### HOUSE-MUSEUMS

Koprivshitsa boasts six house-museums, of which some are closed either on Monday or Tuesday (all operate Wednesday through Sunday). A combined ticket for all six museums (adults/students 5/3 lv) is available at the souvenir shop Kupchinita two doors up the hill from the Tourist Information Centre; most of the museums also sell tickets.

**Karavelov House** (☎ 2176; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 39; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon) was occupied by the parents of the eminent Lyuben Karavelov (1834-79), a journalist and printer who worked for expatriate Bulgarian revolutionary groups based in Russia, Serbia and Romania. He was also the first chairman of the Bulgarian Central Revolutionary Committee. A printing press where various seditious newspapers of Karavelov's were produced is among the exhibits. The three separate buildings were constructed between 1810 and 1835.

**Oslekov House** (☎ 2555; ul Gereniloto 4; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon) was built by Oslekov, a rich merchant who was killed in the line of duty during the 1876 April Uprising. Oslekov House was built between 1853 and 1856, and is arguably the best example of Bulgarian National Revival-period architecture in Koprivshitsa, with a triple-arched entrance, spacious interior, stylish furniture and brightly coloured walls. Woodcarved ceilings, collections of 19th-century costumes, paintings and jewellery add to the experience. Several woodcarvings, some of which were bought during Oslekov's extensive travels, are also on display.

**Debelyanov House** (☎ 2077; ul Dimcho Debelyanov 6; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) is dedicated to Dimcho Debelyanov (1887-1916), a great poet who penned outstanding works before tragically dying in WWI. Built in 1830, the house features a pretty garden and numerous displays about Debelyanov, but the expected period furniture is scarce and the ceilings low. Debelyanov's grave can be seen in the grounds of the Church of Uspenie Bogorodichno (p194).



A well-travelled man of means, Todor Kableshev (1851-76) is revered as having (probably) been the person who fired the first shot in anger to start the 1876 uprising against the Turks. His former home, the glorious **Kableshev House** (☎ 2054; ul Todor Kableshev 8; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun), dates back to 1845 and has numerous exhibits about the April Uprising. Kableshev's grave can also be seen in the grounds of the Church of Uspenie Bogorodichno (p194).

Also called Topalov House, after the original owner, **Lyutov House** (☎ 2134; ul Nikola Belovezhdo 2; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon) was built in 1854 in a style that mimicked Plovdiv's characteristic baroque houses. It's

Koprivshitsa's best-preserved house-museum, featuring a lavish salon with intricately carved ceilings; the landscapes painted on them were created by Mr Lyutov himself. The lower floor contains an exhibit of locally made felt cloths.

Built in 1831 on a southeastern hillside, **Benkovski House** (☎ 2030; ul Georgi Benkovski 5; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Wed-Mon) is associated with the dashing Georgi Benkovski (1843-76), a rebel cavalry commander who led many successful battles until dying in a Turkish ambush. Above the house, and easy to spot from the village centre, is a huge **equestrian statue** of Benkovski on horseback; climb up to it for the excellent views over the entire valley.

### HIKING IN THE SREDNA GORA

The Sredna Gora (Central Range) mountains are spread over 6000 sq km from Iskâr Gorge (near Sofia) to the Tundzha Valley (south of Yambol). The highest peak is Mt Bogdan (1603m) near Koprivshitsa.

*The Mountains of Bulgaria* by Julian Perry provides a detailed description of the popular two- or three-day hike from Hisar (Hisarya) to Koprivshitsa (or vice versa). No dedicated map of the Sredna Gora is available, but most of the mountains and hiking routes are included in the map of Stara Planina that is published by Kartografia.

The map of Koprivshitsa, published by Domino and available in the village, includes a small, but clear, map with five enticing hiking routes around the surrounding hills. One trail (about four hours one way) leads to Mt Bogdan, and a hut where hikers can stay overnight.

### OTHER SIGHTS

The **Church of Uspenie Bogorodichno** (Church of the Dormition of the Virgin) on ul Dimcho Debelyanov, built in 1817, is usually closed, but visitors can peer through the window and wander around the gardens. The church grounds contain **Kableshkov's grave**, and, in the upper section, **Debelyanov's grave**. A poignant statue features Debelyanov's mother anxiously awaiting his return, and reads 'I die and am yet born again in light.'

Beside the park along ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev is the **Sveta Kiril & Metodii School**, built in 1837.

### Festivals & Events

**Re-enactment of the 1876 April Uprising** (1-2 May)

The fateful historical events of the 1876 April Uprising are re-enacted in full costume by locals who prepare for weeks. **International Folk Festival** (next festival summer 2010) Held every five years; folk dancers from all over the country converge here for the occasion.

**Folklore Days Festival** (mid-August) Traditional Bulgarian music and dance troupes perform throughout the town.

### Sleeping

Most of the year, Koprivshitsa's supply of accommodation outweighs demand and thus means there is a lot to choose from, and at reasonable rates. The quality of private rooms is good, though they don't always have bathrooms within the room. The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ /fax 2191; koprivshitsa@hotmail.com; pl 20 April) can arrange private rooms from 25 lv per person during the summer, and less at other times.

**Shuleva House Hotel** (☎ 2091; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 37; s/d/apt 18/24/40 lv) This hotel with large, simple and clean rooms is good value, and staff are friendly.

**Bonchova House** (☎ 2614; ul Tumangelova Cheta 26; d/apt 20/50 lv) Close to the Kalachev Bridge, this

cosy new place has two bright, modern rooms and an apartment; the common room is relaxing and has a working fireplace. Breakfast is 5 lv extra.

**Hotel Kalina** (☎ 2032; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 15; s/d 36/50 lv) The three-star Kalina has a certain amount of class, with spotless rooms and professional service. Rates are good value, and it also has a nice garden.

**Hotel Trayanov Káshta** (☎ 3750; ul Gereniloto 5; d/tr/apt 40/50/60 lv) Perhaps the most atmospheric place in town, this house with garden inside an enclosed courtyard has only a few rooms, which are nevertheless traditionally furnished and colourful. The upstairs balcony overlooking the back lawn is a great place for an evening drink.

**Hotel Panorama** (☎ 2035; ul Georgi Benkovski 40; s/d/f 45/60/80 lv) Although it's 400m from the centre, the Panorama is a very good option. It has lovely views, and the rooms are comfortable and well furnished.

**Hotel Astra** (☎ 2364; hotel\_astra@hotmail.com; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 11; s/d 45/60 lv) Set beautifully in a garden, the Astra is a popular place with large and well-kept rooms.

### Eating

**Dyado Liben** (☎ 2109; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 47; mains 2.50-6 lv; ☎ 11am-midnight) Astonishingly big, this traditional restaurant housed in a mansion dating from 1852 is a wonderfully atmospheric – and inexpensive – place for a hearty evening meal. Management says it can seat 100 people, all in a warren of halls graced with ornate painted walls and heavy, worn wood floors. There's even a circular room where tables orbit a huge, column-like traditional stove extending from floor to ceiling. Find it just across the bridge leading from the main square inside the facing courtyard.

**Pod Starata Krusha** (☎ 2163; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 56; mains 4-6 lv) Right next to the bus station, this cosy little tavern is a nice choice for a traditional evening meal or a quick breakfast (it even has Turkish coffee) before your bus departs. Renowned Targovista wine from the Veliko Târnovo area is served, accompanied by traditional Bulgarian music.

**Chuchura** (☎ 2712; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 66; mains 4-7 lv) Another restaurant over near the bus stop, the Chuchura's terrace makes a fine spot for alfresco dining. Food is good and there's a small hotel attached, too.

**Mehana Starite Borove** (pl 20 April; mains 4-7 lv) The best place for a summertime drink, the Starite Borove is hidden along a laneway near the main square, close to the shady park. The food is decent, but not as good as some of the other places.

**Nazdrave Restaurant** (☎ 087624816; bul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 53; mains 4-7 lv) This cosy place on the opposite bank of the river is good for an evening meal, and has a relaxing summertime terrace – better than sitting indoors when the loud and decidedly non-traditional Bulgarian pop blares from the TV. The Nazdrave is also a great breakfast nook, with crepes accompanied by local strawberry jam and, if you can handle the sourness, very thick, village-fresh *ovcho kisel*o mlyako (sheep's-milk yoghurt).

**Mehana 20 April** (☎ 0899368220; pl 20 April; mains 5-7 lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) This friendly place, on the edge of the square of the same name and close to the Tourist Information Centre, offers a short menu of traditional Koprivshitsa dishes, as well as deliciously done freshwater fish. Dining is enjoyed indoors or (much better) in an attractive back courtyard.

### Shopping

The souvenir shops surrounding the main square are fairly generic. If you want a specific memento of Koprivshitsa, snatch up a felt-cloth carpet or bag; examples are on display inside Lyutov House (p193). At the **Craft Shop** (☎ 2191; ul Dimcho Debelyanov; ☎ 10am-4pm Mon-Sat), visitors can see locals producing felt-cloth products, some of which are sold next door.

Keep an eye out for Neli Keremicheva, the woman usually found under a slanting umbrella at the beginning of the square; she sells delicious local blueberry and strawberry jam, as well as *kisel*o mlyako so thick it won't budge when held upside down.

### Getting There & Away

Especially considering its significance as a tourist destination, Koprivshitsa seems rather poorly served by public transport. The train station is some 9km north of the village itself, thus necessitating a shuttle bus (1 lv, 15 minutes). These buses are theoretically timetabled to meet incoming trains, while bringing passengers from Koprivshitsa to meet outgoing ones. However, if the shuttle bus doesn't come, as has been known to happen, there are no taxis, and the incredibly unhelpful station masters have no phone. With no mobile phone coverage in this remote area, you're left to soldier on to the narrow main road and walk the 8km to town. Good luck!

If you do decide to come by train, there are services from Sofia (5 lv, 2½ hours, four daily) and connections can be made there or in Karlovo for Plovdiv and other points in the country. There's also a daily train to Burgas (11 lv, five hours).

Alternatively, in the centre of Koprivshitsa the little bus stop has a posted list of train times, as well as connecting buses and long-distance bus routes. Five daily buses go to Sofia (7 lv, two hours), the first leaving at 6.45am, while the bus to Plovdiv (7 lv, two hours, daily) departs at a similarly ungodly hour (6.30am). However, note that on Sundays the Plovdiv bus leaves at a more reasonable 2pm.

### HISAR ХИСАР

☎ 0337 / pop 10,000

Therapeutic mineral springs have been Hisar's (also known as Hisarya) main claim to fame ever since Roman times, when it was named Diokletianopolis, after the Emperor Diocletian. Altogether, there are 22 mineral-water springs here, said to cure many ailments; the popularity of these springs even today has ensured this sleepy mountain town's liveliness. Since it's mostly visited in summer, visiting in winter means you will have the place to yourself. The main street has some unique ruins from the days of ancient Rome, though the major reason to visit today, as it was then, is for the indolent spa therapy.

### Orientation & Information

From the bus/train stations, walk (300m) down to the main road, ul Hristo Botev, leaving the ruins on your right. Then turn right onto bul Ivan Vazov to reach the town centre and the park.

A DSK Bank with ATM is on the corner of ul Hristo Botev and bul Ivan Vazov, and there's an internet café on bul General Gurko.

### Sights

Hisar's **Roman walls**, later fortified by the Byzantines, are over 5m high and up to 3m thick, and are some of the best-preserved Roman ruins in all of Bulgaria. Built to protect a 30-hectare span of the town and its mineral baths from invaders, the walls escaped damage from Slavic raiders, who left this part of Bulgaria alone. The most visited section is a short walk from the bus and train stations.

More Roman ruins are found along unnamed roads heading towards the town centre from the main road. These unfenced ruins, which you can wander for free, include portions of an amphitheatre, baths and some dwellings.

The **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 62 012; ul Stambolyski 8; admission 2 lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) features a scale model of the city walls as they would have originally appeared, and some photos of early excavations. Nevertheless, the displays about traditional regional costumes and agricultural and weaving equipment are more engaging. The poorly signposted museum is located past the post office, and is accessible from the main road through a pretty courtyard.

Both hotels listed below have **balneological centres**, offering all sorts of treatments, such as aromatherapy and hydrotherapy. Consultations with 'head physicians' cost from 30 lv for 30 minutes, depending on the treatment required, and include any medications, ointments or unguents the doctor is inspired to give you.

### Sleeping & Eating

Both hotels are about 1km down bul General Gurko, which starts about 700m along the main road from the bus and train stations; look for the sign (in English) to Hotel Augusta. Both are close to the mineral springs.

**Hotel Augusta** (☎ 63 821; www.augustaspa.com; bul General Gurko 3; s 78-98 lv, d 88-138 lv; ☎ ☎) One of Hisar's two main hotels is the Augusta, a little further down the road from the Hotel Hisar and round to the right. It has two buildings, one fully refurbished with air con and smart modern rooms, the other more basic. Both have access to the pool and spa complex.

**Hotel Hisar** (☎ 62 717; fax 62 634; bul General Gurko; s/d 98/118 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) The post-renovation

prices at the Hisar have indeed risen, but get you handsome, well-maintained rooms, several restaurants, a great outdoor pool, a sauna and fitness centre, as well as a modern balneological complex.

Private rooms are generally available on bul General Gurko (look for the signs reading *stay pod naem*).

Besides the good restaurants in both hotels, several hearty, home-style *mehanas* line bul General Gurko; try the **Evropa** (bul General Gurko) or the **National** (bul General Gurko). Also, the **Tsesar** (ul Hristo Botev) serves up excellent Bulgarian grills in a rustic courtyard, decorated by a faux windmill. Chinar, near the town's church, is another popular place.

### Getting There & Away

The adjoining train station and **bus station** (☎ 62 069) both have regional connections. Six daily buses go to Karlovo (2 lv, 30 minutes) and there are other connections to Sofia (13 lv, three hours, three daily) and Veliko Târnovo (12 lv, 3½ hours, four daily) via Kazanlâk (7 lv, two hours, one daily) and Gabrovo (10 lv, three hours, three daily). Regular buses between Karlovo (2 lv, 40 minutes, hourly) and Panagyurishte (3 lv, 1½ hours, two daily on Friday, Saturday and Sunday) also pass through and stop in Hisar.

There are no direct train services from Hisar to Karlovo, but several daily trains connect Hisar with Plovdiv (2.10 lv, 30 minutes).

### KARLOVO KAPJIOBO

☎ 0335 / pop 24,680

Historic Karlovo, nestled in the foothills of the Stara Planina roughly equidistant from Koprivshitsa and Kazanlâk, is not just another appealing mountain town full of National Revival-era architecture and antiquated churches; it's also venerated as the birthplace of Vasil Levski, the leader of the revolution against the Turks in the early 1870s. Although this historic link is everywhere in Karlovo, most (non-Bulgarian, at least) visitors will be rather more inspired by the town's placid atmosphere, churches and classic architecture.

### Orientation & Information

Karlovo sprawls across a long hill, at the base of which are the bus and train stations. From the train station, cross the small park to where three roads go up the hill; the central one, ul

### VASIL LEVSKI

The most revered person in modern Bulgarian history may well be Vasil Levski, whose name graces myriad streets and squares, and who is immortalised in statues and museums throughout the country as 'the apostle of freedom' for his contributions to organising the national resistance to Ottoman rule.

Vasil Ivanov Kunchev was born on 18 July 1837 in Karlovo, and given the nom de guerre 'Levski' (from the Bulgarian word for lion) by his peers. He studied and worked as a monk in Stara Zagora, but in 1862 moved to Belgrade, riding an uncle's horse, to join the anti-Turkish rebellion led by Georgi Rakovski. In 1864, he formally quit from monastic life. After various misadventures the young Levski moved to Bucharest three years later, where he conspired with another revolutionary, Panaiot Hitov. In the summer of the same year Levski was dispatched by Hitov back to Karlovo, where he briefly joined the legion of yet another revered guerrilla, Lyuben Karavelov, before undertaking further conspiratorial travels in Romania and Istanbul.

From 1869 until his betrayal by a comrade to the Turks three years later, Levski travelled the Bulgarian countryside continuously, establishing revolutionary committees in places such as Stara Zagora, Sliven and Lovech. Often, remote monasteries were used to conceal rebels or communicate with the different committee members.

Against Levski's orders, enterprising fighters decided to rob an Ottoman postal courier in the autumn of 1872, provoking a Turkish crackdown designed to unravel the well-concealed revolutionary networks, especially in Lovech, where the clandestine political leadership of the freedom fighters was based. As the number of arrests multiplied, Levski undertook a desperate journey to save the organisation's documents before they could fall into the hands of the Turks. However, on 27 December 1872, he was captured by the Turks in Lovech, and hanged in Sofia on 19 February 1873.

Vasil Levski's dream for a free Bulgaria was, interestingly enough, fuelled by the ideals of liberty, equality and fraternity for all (even the non-Bulgarians in Bulgaria), as exemplified in the rhetoric of the French Revolution. Had he lived to see a liberated Bulgaria, the 'apostle of freedom' might well have sought to continue his quest to help free 'other enslaved nations', as he himself once put it – thus making him a revolutionary in the truest sense.

Vasil Levski, becomes the town's main artery later on. It stretches for 2km to the town square, pl 20 Yuli.

The bus station is about 100m up the left of the three roads from the train station, past the yellowish block of flats and to the right.

There are several foreign exchange offices and internet centres at the top end of ul Vasil Levski.

### Sights & Activities

You can see Karlovo's main sights by walking up ul Vasil Levski to pl 20 Yuli. Stop first at pl Vasil Levski, where the great man is immortalised in a grand **statue** depicting him with a lion (a reference to the adopted nickname of 'lion' given to him by his peers). Turn right, and right again, to the marvellous **Sveta Bogoroditsa Church** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm), a pink structure that contains intricate wooden iconostases. Opposite, the similarly coloured **History Museum** (☎ 4728; ul Vûzrozhdenska 4; admission 0.50 lv;

☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun) features significant ethnological displays.

Further up ul Vasil Levski, a small park contains the disused and closed **Kurshum Mosque**, built in 1485 during the Ottoman occupation. Continue up the mall to the town square, then head left (west) for about 300m, past the **clock tower**, to the **Vasil Levski Museum** (☎ 3489; www.vlevskimuseum-bg.org; ul Gen Kartov 57; admission 1 lv; ☎ 8.30am-1pm & 2-5pm Mon-Fri). This set of rooms around a cobblestone courtyard contains several exhibits about Levski with explanations in English. Ask the caretaker to show you the modern shrine, where you can see a lock of Levski's hair while listening to taped religious chants in Bulgarian. A guided tour in English costs 2.50 lv per person.

Guided nature tours, walking, paragliding, cultural trips and rock climbing trips are offered by Richard and Deborah Adams of **Bulgarian Mountain Tours** (www.bulgarianmountain-tours.com; Vasil Levski village), which is based in the



Shipchenski Polk that runs between the square and ul Petko Stajnov.

**Agence Pagane** (☎ /fax 26 900; ul Petko D Petkov) Travel agency with French- and English-speaking staff; arranges hotel reservations and local tours.

**Internet Centre** (ul Otets Paisii) Under a video-rental store.

**Magic Exchange** (ul Otets Paisii) A reliable exchange office.

**Magic Net** (pl Sevtopolis) Under DEPO clothes shop.

**Post office** (ul 23 Pehoten Shipchenski Polk)

**Telephone centre** Inside the post office.

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 62 817; stour@kz.orbitel.bg; ul Iskra 1) Assists with hotels, excursions and general information about the town.

## Sights

### THRACIAN TOMB OF KAZANLÂK & MUSEUM

In hilly Tyulbe Park, just up from the Kulata Ethnological Complex, is a very large and very locked **tomb** (admission 20 lv; ☎ 10am-5pm), built in the 4th century BC for a Thracian ruler. Discovered during the construction of a bomb shelter in 1944, the tomb is now a Unesco World Heritage site. Along the *dromos* (vaulted entry corridor) is a double frieze with battle scenes. The burial chamber is 12m in diameter, and covered by a beehive dome typical of those built by the Thracians between the 3rd and 5th centuries BC. The dome contains several murals that feature events such as a funeral feast and chariot race.

Considering that you get basically the same experience from seeing the full-scale tomb replica in the nearby **museum** (☎ 64 750; admission 2 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm), most visitors choose not to cough up the 20 lv required for getting the real thing opened up, which is probably just as well. The staff who will guide you around the faux tomb are friendly and speak good English and can answer whatever questions you may have.

### MARKET REACTIONS

Kazanlâk's sprawling *pazar* (open market), particularly vibrant on Tuesdays and Fridays, keeps alive a centuries-old Balkan tradition. Here you can find everything from horseshoes, village honey, wrenches and traditional music to wooden wine cask openers, red peppers, plastic tubs and live chickens. It's a raucous, dusty place where Kazanlâk's many peoples (Bulgarians, Turks, Pomaks and Roma) come together to barter their goods and bump shoulders as beef kebabs sizzle on nearby grills and vendors bark out prices.

For tourists, the market presents not only a unique shopping opportunity, but also a way to immerse oneself with the marvellously photogenic locals. Visitors are greeted with friendly curiosity, whether or not you speak the language, though of course the bottom line is selling – so you'll have to stand your ground when a stubborn old village crone tries to sell you a whip and a saddle for a horse you don't own.

### ISKRA MUSEUM & ART GALLERY

The town's **museum & art gallery** (☎ 23 741; ul Sv Kiril i Metodii; adult/student 2/1 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) displays extensive archaeological finds including pottery, jewellery and tools from excavations carried out at several Thracian tombs, including the one in Tyulbe Park (see left). All explanations are in Bulgarian, so the brochure (2 lv) in English, French or German is helpful.

Upstairs, numerous paintings are displayed, including those by renowned local artists such as Ivan Milev and Vasil Barakov. A printed catalogue (in English and French; 3 lv) is available.

### KULATA ETHNOLOGICAL COMPLEX

Just down from Tyulbe Park and the Thracian tomb, you'll find the appealing Kulata (Tower) district, site of the **Kulata Ethnological Complex** (☎ 621 733; ul Knyaz Mirski; admission 3 lv, with rose-liquor tasting 4 lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-6pm). A replica of a one-storey peasant's home and wooden sheds with agricultural implements and carts are among the rustic exhibits. A courtyard leads to the two-storey House of Hadzhi Eno, built by a wealthy rose merchant in Bulgarian National Revival-period style. Some explanations in German and English are given, and you may be invited by the caretaker to sample some rose tea, liquor or jam.

### MUSEUM OF THE ROSES

The grandly named Research Institute for Roses, Aromatic & Medicinal Plants houses this tiny **museum** (☎ 23 741; ul Osvozhdenie; admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm summer). The photos and displays explain (in Bulgarian only) the 300-year-old method of cultivating the roses, picking their petals and processing the oil.

The attached shop sells rose oils, perfumes, shampoos, liqueurs, tea bags and jams. The museum is 3km north of the centre up ul Osvozhdenie; take a taxi (3 lv one way), or bus 3 from Kazanlâk's main square. Guided tours (rates negotiable) are available in English and French, but ring first about opening times in winter.

### OPEN MARKET

Kazanlâk's **pazar** or open market (see the boxed text, opposite) is a very entertaining, dusty, all-purpose place that offers a truly characteristic Balkan shopping experience – if you happen to be around on a Tuesday or Friday, the market's busiest days, make sure to stop by.

### Sleeping

**Hadzhi Eminova Kâshta** (☎ 62 595; bul Nikola Petkov 22; s/d/apt 20/25/40 lv) This established guesthouse offers big, traditionally furnished rooms featuring woollen quilts, and overlooking an authentic 19th-century walled compound. The one apartment is huge, and worth booking ahead. All rooms feature bathrooms, though they tend to be small, and the restaurant is excellent.

**Hotel-Restaurant Chiflika** (☎ 21 411; www.chiflika-bg.com; ul Knyaz Mirska 38; s/d 38/46 lv; ☎ ) This complex in front of the Church of Sveti Ilias has a traditional look that comes across as being somewhat contrived, and the sometimes grumpy staff haven't yet realised the kind of service required for those trying to be twee. Nevertheless, it does have rooms of a high standard and an attractive restaurant.

**Complex Vesta** (☎ 20 350; complexvesta@abv.bg; ul Chavdar Vojvoda 3; s/d incl breakfast 40/54 lv) Quietly set just off the road behind the House of Culture, this comfortable place has rooms with amenities such as fan, TV, fridge and balcony, and all have good modern bathrooms.

**Hotel Teres** (☎ 64 272; www.hotelteres.com; ul Nikola Petkov; s/d incl breakfast 48/54; ☎ ) This friendly new hotel is located directly below the hill of the Thracian Tomb, opposite the river. It has clean, modern and cosy rooms, a lobby bar and an adjacent restaurant.

**Grand Hotel Kazanlâk** (☎ 63 210; hotel\_kazanlak@abv.bg; pl Sevtopolis; s/d 55/80 lv; ☎ ) The renovated Grand Hotel Kazanlâk has well-done rooms, friendly staff and a great location on the main square. If you want to be close to the action, it's unbeatable, as the hotel has a res-

taurant, the late-night Panorama bar upstairs, and the very popular Cocktail Bar Hollywood attached to it on the square, while other bars, clubs and restaurants are all within a few metres. Those who want something quiet might be better off elsewhere.

**Hotel Palas** (☎ 62 311; www.hotel-palas.com; ul Petko Stajnov 9; s/d/ste incl breakfast 70/96/110 lv; ☎ ) This posh place on a side street just a two-minute walk from the main square offers the classiest rooms in central Kazanlâk. The spacious suites are especially enticing and great value for the price, loaded with toiletries for those compulsive hoarders of hotel freebies. The adjoining restaurant, which offers a better-than-average breakfast for guests, is well regarded by locals, too.

**Hotel Zornitsa** (☎ 63 939; fax 63 652; www.zornica-bg.com; s/d/ste 70/96/110 lv; ☎ ) Located above the town a short walk from the Thracian Tomb, the Zornitsa is best reached from town by car or taxi. It's relaxing, with very comfortable rooms, a pool and a natural setting.

### Eating

Kazanlâk's dining and nightlife scene is mostly concentrated within earshot of the central square. Since the popular places are few, they're always crowded, making the town seem perhaps more happening than it really is – though that's certainly more interesting than the alternative.

**Banicharnitsa Violeta Asenova** (Otets Paisii 33; banitsa 0.80 lv; ☎ 6.30am-9.30pm) Kazanlâk's best breakfast nook is this tiny hole-in-the-wall place opposite the open market, serving a variety of flaky cheese (and other) pies from the *banitsa* and *byurek* family of Balkan pastry.

**Restaurant Moskva** (ul Sevtopolis 9; mains 3-5 lv; ☎ 7.30am-11.30pm) This very busy and efficiently run place off the other side of the square is most popular at lunch, when you take a tray and get in line, choosing from a variety of Balkan specialities. It's smartly outfitted and clean, and there's also a bar.

**New York Pub Pizza & Grill** (☎ 62 464; pl Sevtopolis; mains 4-6 lv; ☎ 10am-1am) This very popular restaurant-pub right on the square has a big menu, serving everything from pizza to fish and grills. It's not gourmet, but the locals like it.

**Hadzhi Eminova Kâshta** (☎ 62 595; bul Nikola Petkov 22; mains 4-7 lv) Set in the courtyard of the hotel of the same name, this well-regarded

restaurant does some of Kazanlák's best traditional cooking.

**Bulgaran** (☎ 64 920; mains 6-10 lv) This tourist-friendly restaurant up near the Hotel Zornitsa has a big menu of tasty Bulgarian specialities but perhaps overdoes it on the traditional-costume front, though service is friendly.

### Drinking

**Cocktail Bar Hollywood** (☎ 0886316604; Grand Hotel Kazanlák, pl Sevtopolis; ☎ 10am-1am) This slick and very popular curbside bar of the Grand Hotel has two rooms, disco balls, strobe lights and tiger skin couches; as stylish as it gets in Kazanlák.

**Arizona Cocktail Bar** (ul Otets Paisii; ☎ 8am-4am). This popular nightspot with both an outdoor terrace and indoor bar serves over 50 different cocktails, made and transported by friendly bar hands. It usually only gets busy after midnight.

### Getting There & Away

Kazanlák's **bus station** (☎ 62 383; ul Kenali) is busy (though open only until 8pm daily), and has connections to Sofia (11 lv, 2½ hours, six daily), Veliko Târnovo (6 lv, 2½ hours), Lovech (8 lv, three hours), Karlovo (twice daily), Haskovo (7 lv, three hours) and Plovdiv (6.50 lv, two hours). About every hour, there's also a bus to Gabrovo (5 lv, 60 minutes to 90 minutes) via Shipka.

Minibuses for Stara Zagora (4 lv, 45 minutes) run half-hourly from just outside the main station where the buses congregate. Further along the road by the roundabout, town bus 6 (0.90 lv, 25 minutes, half-hourly) runs up to Shipka; there's also a stop for this bus in the centre, at the corner of Knyaz Al Battenberg and Sveti Kiril i Metodii.

The Kazanlák **train station** (☎ 662 012; ul Sofronii) connects Sofia and Burgas, via Karlovo and Sliven. There are regular trains to Sofia (7.30 lv, 3½ hours, three daily), Burgas (7.30 lv, three hours, four daily), Karlovo (2.70 lv, one hour, six daily) and Varna (10.30 lv, five hours, three daily).

### ШИПКА ШИПКА

☎ 04324 / pop 2500

The tiny mountain village of Shipka, impressively set in the foothills of steep mountains, is most famous for its proximity to the famous

Shipka Pass. This, the one good route through the Stara Planina, was the site of one of the most decisive battles of the Russo-Turkish War to liberate Bulgaria from Ottoman rule. Aside from the bucolic peacefulness of the very sleepy village, the exquisite Shipka Monastery with its golden dome, and the Freedom Monument (dedicated to the soldiers who died fighting the Turks) makes this a great day trip from Kazanlák. While this can be accomplished most easily by car, it's perfectly feasible to use buses – which will bring you up close and personal with amiable village locals, returning from town with their bags bulging with the day's shopping.

Shipka is now also world-famous for some amazing archaeological remains found here. In 2004, a 2400-year-old burial shrine for Thracian King Seutus III was uncovered nearby, containing vast amounts of Thracian gold and a unique golden mask. The site is still being excavated, while at the time of writing the loot had been triumphantly sent on tour to various world museums. While tourists can still see the physical remains of the tomb, the immense value of the gold means that its permanent residence will be in Sofia, where, even Shipka locals admit, it can be better safeguarded and preserved.

### Sights

#### SHIPKA MONASTERY

Even before arriving in Shipka, you'll see the splendid, onion-shaped golden domes of the **Nativity Memorial Church** (admission 2 lv, photography permit 5 lv; ☎ 8.30am-7pm) glittering from amidst thick woods above the village, framed against the mountain. Part of the Shipka Monastery, and also known as the Church of St Nikolai, the magnificent structure was built in 1902 as a dedication to soldiers who died at the Shipka Pass during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78). The design is heavily influenced by Russian architecture, and features five golden domes and 17 church bells that can be heard for several kilometres when rung. Inside the crypt Russian soldiers who perished are interred, and there are some wonderful frescoes depicting scenes from Russian history. If it's not cloudy, the church offers marvellous views of the Valley of Roses. To get there, follow the sign labelled *Hram Pametnik* for 1.2km through the village, or walk 300m up from the restaurant along the Kazanlák-Gabrovo road.

### SHIPKA PASS

About 13km along a winding road north of Shipka village is the Shipka Pass (1306m). Some 900 steps lead to the top of Mt Stoletov (1326m), dominated by the impressive, 32m-high **Freedom Monument** (admission free; ☎ 9am-5pm). It was built in 1934 as a memorial to the 7000 Russian troops and Bulgarian volunteers who, in August 1877, died while successfully repelling numerous attacks by some 27,000 Turkish soldiers desperately trying to relieve their besieged comrades in Plevna. To reach the pass from Kazanlák or Shipka, take a bus to Haskovo, Gabrovo or Veliko Târnovo and ask the driver to let you off at the Shipka Pass (Shipchensky prokhod).

### Sleeping & Eating

**Our pick Hotel IT Shipka** (☎ /fax 2112, 0896755090; www.shipkaithotel.com; ul Kolyo Adjara 12; s/d/apt 37/42/82 lv; ☎) This brand new guesthouse located in a quiet residential area 500m east of the square has attractive, modern rooms with great views of either the Valley of Roses, or up to the mountain and the gleaming domes of the Church of St Nikolai. The hotel's little restaurant serves home-cooked Bulgarian fare, and there's even a small outdoor swimming pool. Friendly owner Ivan speaks excellent English and will gladly come to collect you from the bus stop on the main square if you ring ahead. Ivan and his wife Tosha can help arrange local hiking and other outdoor activities in the mountains.

**Hotel-Restaurant Shipka** (☎ 2730; Shipka Pass; r 50 lv) If you want to stay at the pass itself, this is your best bet. Although not the bargain it used to be, the hotel features well furnished rooms, some quite large with separate sitting areas. It's located about 50m up from the car park at the top of the pass.

### Getting There & Away

Bus 6 runs every 30 minutes between the local bus stop near the Kazanlák bus station and Shipka village (0.90 lv, 25 minutes). Alternatively, the hourly bus between Kazanlák and Gabrovo stops at the village, as well as Shipka Pass, as do buses to Veliko Târnovo.

### СТАРА ЗАГОРА СТАРА ЗАГОРА

☎ 042 / pop 144,150

The modern city of Stara Zagora (literally 'old behind the mountain') is an important point

for national train and bus lines, though it's worth seeing for more than the time it takes to make your connection. It boasts one of Bulgaria's nicest central parks and, despite being laid out according to an uninspiring planned grid system, it is a surprisingly stylish place filled with beautiful young people luxuriating in cafés along the pedestrian malls.

Stara Zagora has a few more edifying ancient sites and a museum, but is most famous in Bulgaria as the home of Zagorka, Bulgaria's number one beer. The brewery is visible as you enter from the west, though unfortunately it doesn't conduct tours.

### History

Throughout history, the salubrious climate and fertile land around Stara Zagora attracted many invaders and settlers, including the Thracians (from the 4th century BC), who called it Beroe. In around AD 100, the Romans came, creating a prosperous city they called Ulpia Augusta Trayana. Stara Zagora continued to be significant due to its strategic location during Byzantine and medieval Bulgarian times.

During the Turkish occupation, the city was destroyed often, and was abandoned altogether in the mid-13th century. After eventually regrouping, it saw fierce fighting during the Russo-Turkish War, and was again completely demolished by the Turks in 1877. Unfortunately, most of the surviving Thracian and Roman ruins were also wrecked at this time and the few surviving remnants of those eras are now largely hidden beneath the modern city. Reconstruction of Stara Zagora commenced in 1879, and here one of Bulgaria's first opera houses was opened. Today, it's very much a living city, and a thriving educational and cultural centre where visitors (mostly of the business kind) are increasing.

### Orientation & Information

Foreign exchange offices line ul Tsar Simeon Veliki. Travellers cheques can be exchanged and credit cards used to obtain cash at the United Bulgarian Bank, located in a tiny mall off ul Ruski.

**Post office** (ul Sv Knyaz Boris I; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri)

**Telephone centre** (☎ 6am-midnight) Inside the post office.



four hours, every hour), Plovdiv (7 lv, 1½ hours), Burgas (14.90 lv, three hours, every hour) and Sliven (7 lv, 1¼ hours, hourly). There are also services to Varna (8 lv, five hours, five daily), Veliko Tŕrnovo (10 lv, three hours, seven daily), Ruse (7.10 lv, five hours, four daily) and Kotel (9.30 lv, three hours, four daily).

For Kazanlák (3 lv, 45 minutes), catch a bus that passes through en route to Veliko Tŕrnovo, or get a direct minibus (which departs when full) from the bus station. Minibuses from Kazanlák will leave you in Stara Zagora's centre. As with all big bus depots in Bulgaria, numerous private companies offer different prices and further destinations, including international lines to destinations such as Athens and Istanbul.

Stara Zagora's **train station** (☎ 626 752) is located at the southern end of ul Mitropolit Metodii Kusev, a five-minute walk from the bus station. Stara Zagora is on the major train line between Sofia and Burgas, and thus has many connections. Six daily trains serve Sofia (10.30 lv, four hours), via Plovdiv (5.10 lv, two hours). Going the other way, eastwards to Burgas (7.60 lv, two hours), six trains depart daily. Five trains daily also serve Kazanlák (5.10 lv, one hour), Veliko Tŕrnovo (5.70 lv, three hours) and Ruse (9.60 lv, six hours); note that for these, as for Sliven, you sometimes end up having to change trains in Tulovo (about 45 minutes east of Stara Zagora). There are also three daily services to Varna (10.90 lv, five hours).

**Rila Bureau** (☎ 622 724) sells advance tickets for domestic trains and tickets for all international services; it's at the train station.

## SLIVEN СЛИВЕН

☎ 044 / pop 101,300

Sitting in a sort of bowl around rocky hills of up to 1000m in height, Sliven is one of the most well-known Bulgarian towns for its role in the 19th-century struggle against the Ottomans. While the most famous nearby sight, the so-called 'Blue Rocks', amounts to somewhat a case of false advertising, Sliven is still a laid-back and authentic small city with a handful of unique museums and an increasingly interesting accommodation scene. It also makes a good base for trips to relatively remote, but beautiful mountain towns such as Kotel and Medven.

The Thracians, Romans and Greeks all settled in the Sliven area, but little evidence of their civilisations remains. Sliven's modern history is inextricably linked to the *haidouks*, the anti-Turkish rebels who lived in the rocky hills nearby from the early 18th to the mid-19th centuries. Eventually uniting their cause under the leadership of Hadzhi Dimitŕr and the revered Vasil Levski, they rose up successfully against their Turkish overlords. Despite the plenitude of communist concrete and decrepit apartment blocks, Sliven is worth visiting. Its friendly citizenry includes a surprisingly large number of elderly bicycle owners, and a notable Roma population, too.

## Orientation & Information

Sliven's main square, pl Hadzhi Dimitŕr, is where most services are located. The town hall is to the east of it, the Stefan Kirov Dramatic Theatre is to the north, and to the south is the appealing Deboya Church. The post office & telephone centre are also here.

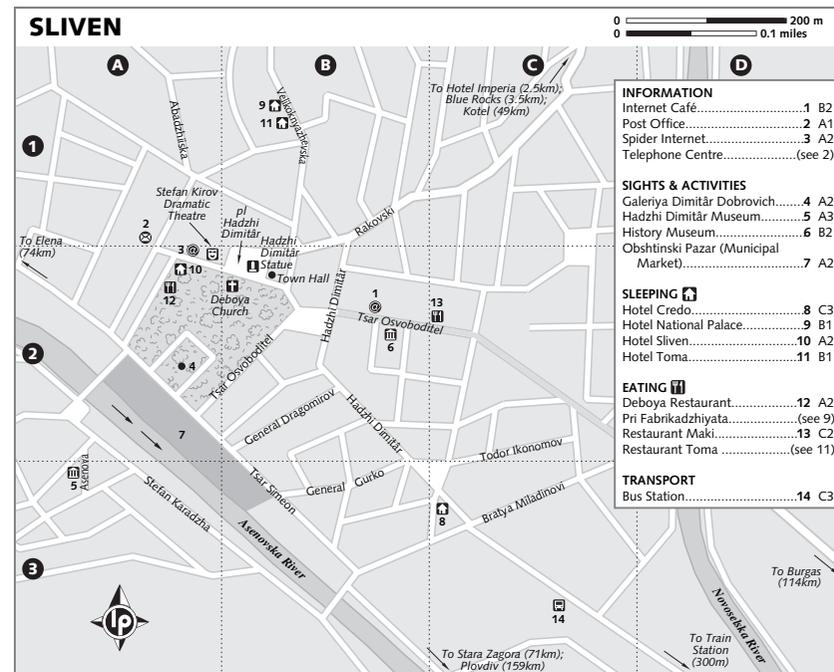
Foreign exchange offices line the upper (southeastern) section of ul Hadzhi Dimitŕr and the pedestrian mall, ul Tsar Osvoboditel. There's an **internet caf ** (ul Tsar Osvoboditel) inside the Voenen Klub, as well as **Spider Internet** (pl Hadzhi Dimitŕr) near the Hotel Sliven in the side of the theatre building.

## Sights & Activities

### BLUE ROCKS

Within the folds of these magnificent rocks once hid the *haidouks*, bedevilling the Turks and making armed mischief. However, these craggy peaks a few kilometres out of town are not exactly blue, and not particularly different from other craggy peaks encountered around the world, though the air is crisp and clean and the views from above are marvellous. A **chairlift** (one way/return 5/10 lv; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Tue-Sun, 12.30-5.30pm Mon) can get you up there, or you can walk (one to 1½ hours) up the hill following the chairlift. From the top of the chairlift, a path leads down about 300m to the main road; cross it and proceed another 500m through the woods to Hizha Poveda, which serves drinks and basic meals.

To reach the chairlift from Sliven, catch minibus 13 outside the train station or Hotel Sliven. Alternatively, walk about 1km uphill from the end of the route for trolleybus 18 or 20 from the city centre. Taxis are about 5 lv one way.



## HADZHI DIMITŔR MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 622 496; ul Asenova 2; admission 2 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) dedicated to the leader of the 19th-century rebel movement is set in a lovely building and features several rooms of furniture (including antique weaving equipment) set around a cobblestone courtyard.

## HISTORY MUSEUM

Along the mall, the **History Museum** (☎ 622 495; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 18; admission 2lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Sat) occupies a grand old building of three floors that house archaeological and ethnological items such as coins, weapons and books. The best exhibits concern the revolutionary struggle against the Turks.

**Galeriya Dimitŕr Dobrovich** (☎ 622 083; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 13; admission free; ☎ 9am-12.45pm & 2-4.45pm Mon-Sat) is signposted from the centre as 'Sirak Skirnik'. This art gallery in the park displays the works of 19th- and 20th-century Bulgarian artists, including many by its namesake, Sliven-born painter Dimitŕr Dobrovich. Among the works, which display strong French and Italian influences, are

portraits of local luminaries and ordinary people, as well as numerous impressionistic landscape paintings (including an evocative portrayal of Veliko Tŕrnovo). The gallery's most intriguing section, however, belongs to the **Museum of Christian Art** on the lower floor, which has a large collection of 18th- and 19th-century icons, some from the Tryavna school of icon painting. Works range from monumental wall icons to unique small pieces, the most unusual being an almost Oriental icon of the Virgin Mary surrounded by roses (1836).

## OBSHTINSKI PAZAR (MUNICIPAL MARKET)

Shop with the locals at this large warren of shops, which sells everything from fruits and vegetables to electronics supplies. Clothes are shockingly cheap ( 8 for a good pair of jeans), and sometimes, even stylish. Unexpectedly, an information centre on NATO and EU affairs stands in the middle of the market, educating Bulgarians about the wonders of their country's recent 'Euro-Atlantic integration'. The market's entrance is located opposite ul Tsar Simeon where it meets the park's southwestern edge.

## HIKING

From the oft-closed information centre set along the road to the Blue Rocks chairlift, marked trails head through the hills to the signposted caves used by the *haidouks*. Information (in English) about the trails is included in a mapless leaflet (1.50 lv), available at the chairlift.

For more general information about local hikes, consult the local **National Park Authority** (☎ /fax 22 926; dpp.skamani@sl.bia-bg.com). For details about hiking in the region, see p210.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Sliven** (☎ 624 056; fax 625 112; pl Hadzhi Dimitar; s/d 23/36 lv) This imposing communist throwback looms high in the centre of town and offers somewhat musty, worn rooms that feel like a neglected college dormitory. Nevertheless, it's the only real budget option in town and reasonably clean.

**our pick** **Hotel Toma** (☎ 623 333; www.hotel toma.com; ul Velikoknyazhevska 27; d incl breakfast 50-60 lv; ☎ ☑) A wonderful surprise is in store for guests at the Toma, a truly enchanting guesthouse created from a lavish 18th-century residence. This cosy and very friendly place has only six rooms, all done up in traditional style, with décor ranging from antlers and bearskins on some rooms' walls to ornate woodcarvings and sumptuous curtains in others. Rooms on the upper floor are slightly more spacious than those on the ground floor, but all are great and all have hydromassage showers, air conditioning and wireless internet access. The *coup de grace* is room 4, with an ornate painted cupola and a superb hand-carved wooden ceiling dating from the 18th century – best admired from the comfortable, big bed, which has (of course) a carved wooden frame.

**Hotel Credo** (☎ 625 080; ul Predel 1; d 59 lv) Not far from the centre, the Credo has clean and modern rooms, though a bit cramped and not traditional in any way. The entrance is tucked into a small street; you will see the large sign looming overhead from the main street. It's a small place, without much in the way of services, but staff are friendly and some speak English.

**Hotel National Palace** (☎ 662 929; www.nationalsl.bg; ul Velikoknyazhevska 29; s/d/ste/apt 68/88/90/120 lv; ☎ ☑) Right next to the Hotel Toma, the National Palace is Sliven's best business hotel, offering classy, clean-smelling rooms with all expected amenities. The infinitesimal price difference

between doubles and the more spacious studios means you might want to go for the latter. Nice touches include contemporary art in the hallways and rainbow-hued floor lighting opposite the elevators. The well-stocked restaurant, Pri Fabrikadzhivata (below), in a courtyard setting is another plus. At the time of writing, there were plans for a fitness centre.

**Hotel Imperia** (☎ 667 599; www.hotelimperia.net; ul Panaiot Hitov; d/ste/apt 70/110/150 lv; ☎ ☑ ☑) Some 3km from Sliven's centre and about 1km from the chairlift, the Imperia has sophisticated, colourful rooms with individual character and décor, along with exemplary bathrooms. There is both a swimming pool and tennis courts. This is a good option for those with transport and concentrating on Sliven's outdoor attractions.

## Eating

**Restaurant Maki** (ul Tsar Osvoboditel; mains 4-6 lv) A large and popular restaurant just off the square, this place has a huge outdoor section for summer dining, though the interior is somewhat bland. It does good grills and salads, among other fare.

**Deboya Restaurant** (☎ 625 427; pl Hadzhi Dimitar; mains 5-7 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) The fairly cavernous Deboya is very central, located next to the Hotel Sliven's front parking. It's a popular place for pizza and traditional Bulgarian dishes.

**Restaurant Toma** (☎ 0886836263; ul Velikoknyazhevska 27; mains 5-7 lv) This lively *mehana* outside the Hotel Toma has a typically large menu of traditional Bulgarian specialties, including parts of animals you might never have expected could (or should) be eaten – but never mind, the food and the atmosphere are great, with live Bulgarian (and sometimes Greek) music performed nightly, and diners weaving between tables in the throes of traditional Balkan dance. Hotel Toma guests enjoy a 10% discount.

**Pri Fabrikadzhivata** (☎ 662 929; ul K Irecheck 14; mains 8-14 lv) With a curious name that literally means 'at the manufacturer's place', this somewhat posh restaurant in the courtyard of the Hotel National Palace (left) serves an extensive range of good Bulgarian dishes and features somewhat bland live renditions of forgotten pop chestnuts on most nights. There's seating indoors, outdoors and (when there's enough of a crowd) in an atmospheric 18th-century house next door, which once belonged

to a famous revival-period industrialist, Dobri Zheliakov. The restaurant's prices are relatively steep, though the food is good, with the roast lamb being downright succulent.

## Getting There & Away

From the small **bus station** (☎ 662 629; ul Hadzhi Dimitar), just past the massive Bila Supermarket, many daily buses and minibuses go to Stara Zagora (7 lv, one hour) and Plovdiv (9 lv, three hours). Regular buses serve Veliko Tarnovo (11 lv, two hours, eight daily) and Sofia (16 lv, five hours, 10 daily). There are two daily buses to Kazanlak (9 lv, one hour), and one to Ruse (14 lv, four hours).

Sliven's **train station** (☎ 622 614) is, like those of Stara Zagora and Plovdiv, on the busy Sofia-Burgas line and so sees a lot of action. There are daily trains to Sofia (11.90 lv, 5½ hours, three daily), Burgas (5.40 lv, 1½ hours, seven daily), Kazanlak (4.80 lv, two hours, six daily), Stara Zagora (5.10 lv, two hours, five daily), Plovdiv (8.40 lv, four hours, three daily), Ruse (10.90 lv, seven hours, three daily) and Varna (8.40 lv, four hours, three daily). Unlike the bus station, which closes at about 8pm, the train station is open all night.

## KOTEL KOTEJI

☎ 0453 / pop 7500

Set as if in a bowl surrounded by rolling peaks, little Kotel is a quiet and modest mountain town, though a very historic one, with its strong links to the 19th-century Bulgarian revolutionary movement. Being somewhat remote, set 49km northeast of Sliven on a forested mountain road, Kotel has not really had the fortune (or misfortune) of being discovered by tourism. It's a friendly place, where children scamper about and village elders will greet you with a smile and *dobur den* (good day). Here the crisp mountain air is permeated with the smell of wood-burning stoves in autumn, while the leafy square has just enough moss between the stones to keep your feet buoyant.

Kotel is known for having been the birthplace of numerous Bulgarian scholars, writers and revolutionaries, including Safronii Vrachanski, Georgi Rakovski and Petar Beron. At the same time, the Turks exempted the village from onerous responsibilities such as tax payments because local artisans were contracted to outfit the Ottoman army in the mid-1800s. Kotel was home for 126 'enlight-

eners' active during the burst of revolutionary activity from 1877 to 1878. Kotel is today known for its carpets and rugs, which are made from wool in homes on wooden looms. The Kotel style predominantly features four colours: red, black, green and blue.

On 15 July 1894, a fire ravaged most of Kotel, sparing only the western Galata district. Although the houses and churches were rebuilt, the National Revival period had passed and the town is not exactly like Lovech or Koprivshtitsa – which is perhaps just why a visit here might be a relief for those past saturation point on 19th-century Bulgarian architecture.

## Orientation & Information

Approaching Kotel on either of the two main entry roads, drivers will find petrol stations. For those bussing it, the station is a five-minute walk to the centre, where there is an ATM, a low-cost international telephone centre and shops.

The pink municipal building is on the square; here English-speaking tourism official Hristina Dimitrova (☎ 2030; obkotel@vip.bg) can provide information and brochures on local attractions. The official **information centre** (☎ 2334; ul Izvorska 14; ☎ 9am-7pm) is further west on the long ul Izvorska, which passes through the small Galata old town.

## Sights

The **Exhibition Hall of Carpets & Woodcarving** (☎ 2613; ul Izvorska 17), 500m northwest of the bus station, exhibits and sells examples of the famed Kotel style of carpets. The town also has several museums, the best being the **History Museum** (National Revival Kotel Enlighteners; ☎ 2549; admission 4 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm), on the central square, which presents items dating from 19th-century revolutionary times, and Georgi Rakovski's mammoth mausoleum. The **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 2315; ul Altunlu Stoyan 5; admission 4 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm), about 200m west of the Exhibition Hall, is also worth a peek. For a more visceral connection with Bulgarian tradition, you can learn to play the *gayda* (Balkan bagpipe) and get tuition in other traditional music and dance at the **Philip Kotev School** (☎ 2215; smu\_k\_1@mail.bg; ul Geori Zahariev 2, 8970), which sometimes holds recitals.

The **Church of Sveta Troitsa** (☎ 2430; ☎ 7.30am-6.30pm), located in a leafy area near the main square, is a quite large, almost Gothic-looking

structure built in 1871. It has some compelling icons and frescoes, and sells the usual religious paraphernalia. The kindly caretaker heatedly denies that the curious triangle and all-seeing eye inscribed on the outside wall comprise a Masonic symbol – a question she is frequently asked by tourists. Outside the church is a fountain with cold drinking water.

### Sleeping

Private rooms can be found wherever you see the *stay pod naem* sign in house windows. The tourist office or municipal officials can sometimes arrange private stays, too.

**Kotel Hotel** (☎ 2885; ul Izvorska 59; s/d 12/24 lv) Run-down but very cheap, the Kotel is located a bit after the tourist information centre and has simple rooms that are outdated but passable for a night.

**Starata Vodenitsa** (☎ 2360; d 30 lv) Certainly the best ambience in Kotel is enjoyed at this guesthouse comprising seven dark-wood, traditionally styled rooms, each with fire-

place and unique Kotel rugs. Reached from the old town along ul Krum Petrov, the place is a bit away from the centre but attracts locals, too.

**Hotel Kristal** (☎ 2885; ul Izvorska 59; s/d/apt incl breakfast 40/60/100 lv) This very new hotel tucked around the corner from the main square has 14 clean, bright and modern rooms and two apartments. Somewhat improbably, it also has a casino attached.

### Eating

Kotel has a dearth of restaurants, with the best eatery being that at the hotel Starata Vodenitsa (mains 4 to 7 lv), where Bulgarian meat dishes are well represented.

**Café Altanla Stoyan** (ul Izvorska 27; ☎ 9am-8pm) For something really offbeat, check out this tiny, ramshackle café, based in the rough-hewn original home of Altanla Stojan Voyvoda (b 1767), an obscure early freedom fighter against the Turks. None of it has been beautified or restored, the left side of the house

being now a rudimentary shop with vegetables thrown around, an old-fashioned scale and sometimes a cat sitting on said scale. On the right, there are a few small tables where colourful local characters drink coffee or down shots of *rakia*.

### Getting There & Away

Despite its remoteness, Kotel provides access to many places around Bulgaria. From the little **bus station** (☎ 2052), 13 daily buses and minibuses go to Sliven (5 lv, one hour), the last leaving Kotel at 6pm. Note that there are two different routes for travelling between

the two places, via either the main highway on the plain, south of and parallel to the Stara Planina, or over the mountain road, which is much more beautiful and takes the same time. Ask the staff which route individual buses will take.

Travelling from Kotel through Sliven and Stara Zagora, you can also get to Plovdiv (10 lv, four hours, four daily) and Sofia (20 lv, five hours, two daily). There are also three daily buses to Shumen (7 lv, two hours) and Burgas (8 lv, two hours), and one to Ruse (10 lv, four hours). Numerous buses and minibuses serve Kotel-area villages.

#### WONDERS OF NATURE: UNEXPLORED TREASURES OF THE KOTEL AREA

With its magnificent setting amidst gorgeous mountains and forests, Kotel is an ideal base for hiking, caving, bird-watching and other outdoor activities. Several villages around it, such as Zheravna, Katunishte and Medven, though smaller and less developed than Kotel, are increasingly becoming popular for their proximity to various unique and captivating natural attractions.

First of all, if coming to Kotel from Sliven, make sure to drive or take a bus that follows the mountain road, and not the plains route that runs south of the mountains. The former is a stunning and tranquil journey, where the narrow road is surrounded by almost uninterrupted thick forests, streams and occasional meadows.

These rich forests around Kotel and its villages are home to rare flora and fauna, including groves of silver firs unique in the eastern Balkans, and old woods of *orlitsa* beeches, where majestic golden eagles and other birds of prey soar overhead. Cliffside nesting areas of these eagles are found 5km west of Kotel at a place called, sensibly enough, **Eagle Rocks**.

The Kotel area is also very rich in caves, some 14 of them being located in the area between Zhelenich and Zlosten alone. **Eagle Cave**, 7km west of Kotel, is not for the squeamish, filled as it is with thousands of bats. The so-called **Fairy Cave** near Zhelenich comprises 3100m of galleries (the sixth-longest distance in Bulgaria) and features unusual stalagmite formations. Another cave at Zlosten, northeast of Kotel, is some 242m deep, the third-deepest in the country.

The most aesthetically pleasing of all local attractions, however, is near little Medven, a village that now has a few traditional guesthouses and restaurants to offer. It's best known for the sublime **Siniya Vir** (Blue Whirlpool), a crystal-clear pool of mountain water (part of the Medvenska River) into which a wispy waterfall tumbles 7m down from the cliffs that enclose the pool. It's about a 45-minute walk from the village to get there.

Unusual rock formations linked with the ancient Thracian religion are found at Yablanovo, northeast of Kotel, and at a place called Chobra Tash, 6km north of Kotel, close to the **Urushki Rocks**, a chain of bizarre limestone rocks believed to have been used as a sanctuary in the mysterious ancient Thracian religion.

For more details about the natural wonders of Kotel and environs, ask for the helpful Hristina Dimitrova at Kotel's **municipal headquarters** (☎ 0453-2030; obkotel@vip.bg).

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