

# Northern Bulgaria



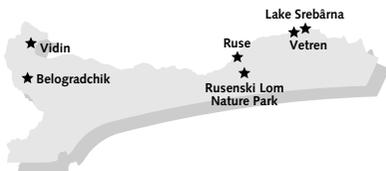
Although it's less visited than other parts of the country, Bulgaria's tranquil north is still well worth exploring. It's a place full of both unexpected surprises and obvious draws – such as the great River Danube, which ribbons along most of the country's border with Romania. Northern Bulgaria's major attractions include the well-preserved Roman castle overlooking the river at Vidin and the stunning prehistoric rock formations of Belogradchik; both are only about four hours away from Sofia.

Further on to the east, the enigmatic medieval monasteries at Basarbovo and Ivanovo peek out of cliffs in the vast Rusenski Lom Nature Park, while serene Lake Srebarna is a major refuge for rare species of birds (and the bird-watchers who flock to them). Magnificent neoclassical architecture and a vibrant café culture characterise the flourishing river city of Ruse, the region's capital, which is also the gateway to Bucharest in Romania, three hours to the north.

Since tourism has yet to make major inroads in Bulgaria's northern border region, it also remains an area with marvellously authentic and friendly locals, ranging from fishermen in combat fatigues to whole roving brass bands. If you're looking for a taste of the offbeat in a truly off-the-beaten-track locale, northern Bulgaria is the place to go.

## HIGHLIGHTS

- Step back in time**  
 Explore Vidin's remarkably well preserved Baba Vida Museum-Fortress (opposite)
- Natural wonders**  
 Climb the huge Belogradchik rocks, seamlessly blended with the Roman Kaletu Fortress (p262)
- Urban sophistication**  
 Enjoy the Austro-Hungarian architecture and vibrant café society of Ruse (p267)
- Get spiritual**  
 Marvel at the frescoed cave churches of Basarbovo and Ivanovo in the Rusenski Lom Nature Park (p273)
- Eco-escape**  
 Gaze out on the tranquil waters of Lake Srebarna (p274), home of rare bird species, and fish the Danube at nearby Vetren



## VIDIN ВИДИН

☎ 094 / pop 69,400

The largest town in northwest Bulgaria, and a convenient place for travelling to or from Romania, Vidin enjoys an impressive setting above the balmy Danube. Although it has just one major attraction, the well-preserved Baba Vida Roman fortress, Vidin is a relaxing enough place, with most of the riverfront being taken up by little parks; these include colourful playgrounds with a certain Soviet appeal, flowers, shady trees and even a grassy strip for sunbathing above the river. The parks make Vidin a nice place for kids to scamper around, and for elders to enjoy a peaceful evening stroll. A handful of churches and museums comprises the town's cultural offerings.

Although Vidin's erstwhile commercial significance has diminished drastically since the 1990s, when UN economic sanctions on neighbouring Serbia caused trade to be rerouted further east to Ruse, a handful of cafés and restaurants keeps up a spark of life. Still, unemployment is high, and decrepit, communist-era buildings are plentiful, with the grand, and poorly lit central square and leafy streets seeming eerily empty at night. Despite its lonesome feel, however, Vidin is still a unique place and justifies an overnight stay.

## History

Vidin's location on a bend in the river, east of the Stara Planina mountain range, has historically made it strategically important. The Celts, and perhaps the Thracians before them, settled there until the 3rd century BC, when the Romans built a fortress called Bononia over the Celtic settlement of Dunonia to control this key Danube crossing.

Throughout the Byzantine centuries, the Bulgars were chronically at war with the empire, and Vidin (known then as Bdin) was much contested due to its strategic importance. By 1185, when Byzantium was declining, Bulgarian brothers Peter and Asen revolted, wresting this river garrison away from Constantinople's control and beginning the Second Bulgarian Empire. A succession of notable Bulgar leaders followed, including Shishman in 1280 and his son Michail, who became tsar in 1323. During this (literally) golden period, contemporary sources attest, the imperial coffers were bursting with lucre. The Second Bulgarian Empire finally fell in

1396, with the Ottoman capture of Bdin (subsequently renamed 'Vidin').

Under the Ottomans an extensive city wall was built, and the Baba Vida Fortress strengthened. By the 16th century, Vidin was the largest town in the Bulgarian part of the Ottoman *vilayet* (province) of Eastern Rumelia, and one of the biggest Danube ports. In the late 18th century, when the Ottoman Empire began disintegrating, local *pasha* (high official) Osman Pazvantoglu declared the Vidin district independent. In 1878, during the Russo-Turkish War, Vidin was presented to the new Bulgarian state by the Romanian army. Seven years later, the Serbs tried but failed to take the city.

## Orientation

From the train station and bus station across from it, turn right two blocks to the Danube and the Port Authority building (Rechna Gara). Following the water north brings you to the parks, and several restaurants, bars and hotels. From here the Baba Vida Fortress is a 20-minute walk north along the waterfront. The sprawling town square, pl Bdintsi, one block northeast of the train station, features an enormous communist-era monument, banks and shops.

## Information

Foreign exchange offices, banks and several ATMs line ul Tsar Simeon Veliki and pl Bdintsi.

**Cyber Zone** (ul Targovska 3)

**Post office** (☎) 7am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1.30pm Sat) Between the square and train station.

**Telephone centre** (☎) 7am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-1.30pm Sat) In the post office.

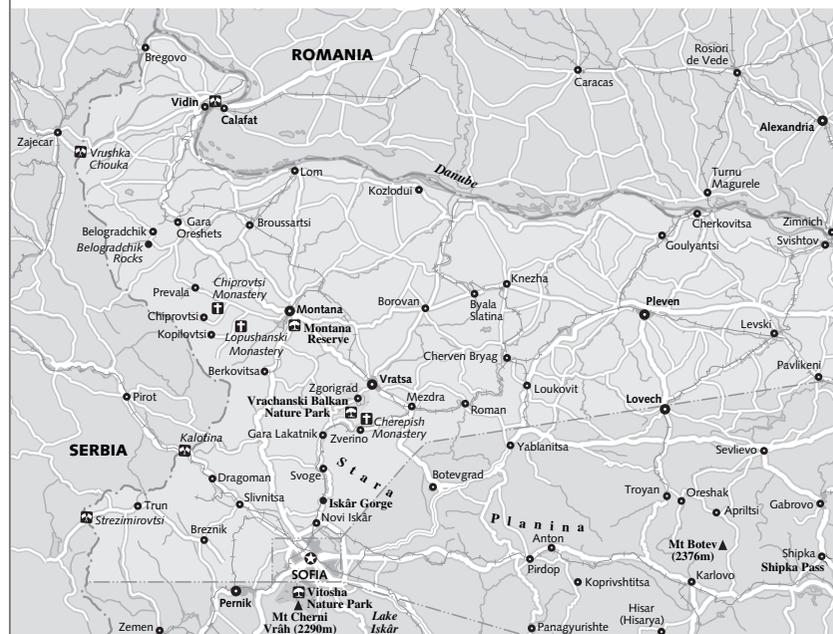
**Tourist Information Centre** (☎) 601 421; tsviat@abv.bg; pl Bdintsi 6; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri)

## Sights

### BABA VIDA MUSEUM-FORTRESS

The marvellously intact **Baba Vida Museum-Fortress** (☎ 601 705; admission 2 lv, guided tour in Bulgarian or Russian 5 lv; ☎ 8.30am-5pm summer, 10am-5pm winter) stands on the riverside park's northern end, overlooking the Danube. Between the 10th and 14th centuries, the Bulgars fortified the ruined walls of the 3rd-century Roman citadel of Bononia. What you will see today dates from the 17th century, when the Ottomans upgraded its fortifications and made it an arsenal. Baba Vida escaped destruction during

## NORTHERN BULGARIA



the Russo-Turkish War of 1877–78, remaining today as Bulgaria's best-preserved medieval stone fortress.

Despite its immensity (70m-long walls, with some remaining outer walls continuing several hundred metres further south), the Baba Vida is relatively empty, collected weaponry and a waxen prisoner ensconced in the dungeon being the only inhabitants. Notice boards (in French) present the history and uses of the fortress's sections. A deep moat surrounds the structure.

Between the fortress and the river is an upper patch of grass, used by locals for sunbathing. Down on the river, a tiny strip of pebbles passes for a beach; from here brave Bulgarians try rudimentary swimming in summer. However, considering the currents, boats and nearby factories, it's probably better for your health not to follow suit.

## OTHER ATTRACTIONS

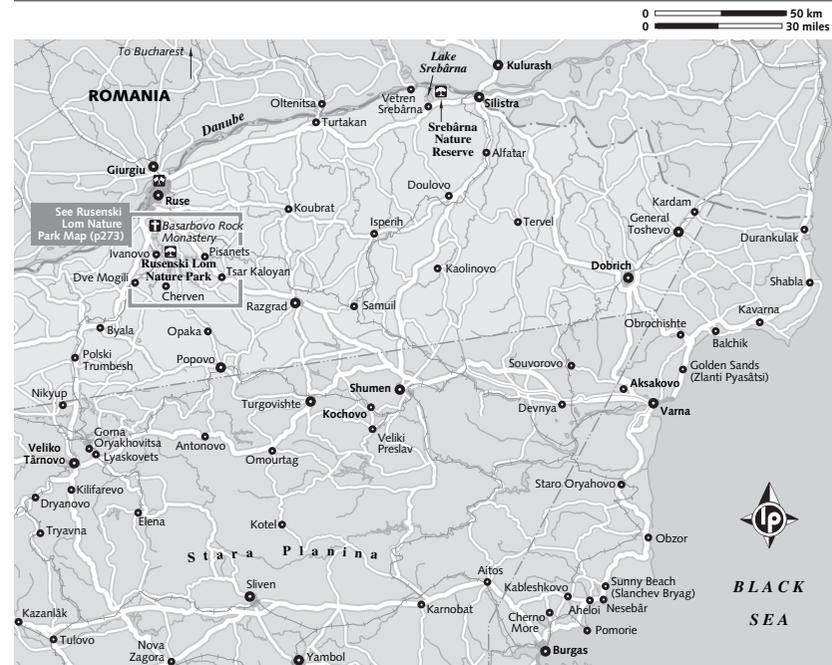
Vidin's main cathedral, **Sveti Velikomachenik Dimitar** (ul Tsar Simeon Veliki; ☎ 8am–6pm), has benefited from partial restoration work, and has nice frescoes and icons. The **Archaeological**

**Museum** (☎ 624 421; ul Tsar Simeon Veliki 12; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Tue–Sun), situated northwest of the square, displays Thracian and Roman jewellery and statues, plus exhibits from the Bulgarian National Revival period. The museum building was once an Ottoman *konak* (police station).

An unusual monument decrying totalitarian repression stands near the Hotel Dunav – the post-Soviet **Victims of Communism Memorial**. Further north along the river, before the fortress, is a more sanguine piece of Soviet civic architecture, the **Mother Bulgaria Monument**.

A couple of blocks inland, between the main square and the fortress, are the 18th-century **Osman Pazvantoglu Mosque** (ul Osman Pazvantoglu) and the modern **Church of Sveti Nikolai** opposite. The **Krăstata Kazarma** (☎ 23 855; ul Knyaz Boris I), housing the local history museum, is usually closed. Vidin's other religious buildings include the 17th-century **Church of Sveta Petka** and a now-abandoned **synagogue** (ul Baba Vida).

A small **contemporary art gallery** (Hudozhestvena Galeriya Nikola Petrov; admission free; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Fri), named after renowned Bulgarian painter Nikola Petrov, showcases paintings by local



artists. It's housed in a stately white neoclassical mansion adjacent to the Hotel Bononia.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Dunav** (☎ /fax 600 177; ul Edelvais 3; s/d 30/50 lv, with shared bathroom 18/36 lv) The Dunav is centrally located and offers Vidin's cheapest rates. Some rooms have a lived-in, musty feel, while others have slightly upgraded furnishings.

**Hotel Bononia** (☎ 606 031; moira\_bg200@yahoo.com; ul Bdin 2; s/d 43/65 lv; ☎) Wedged between the main square, river and park, the Bononia has a very central location and friendly staff, offering modern rooms with nice, if small bathrooms, air conditioning and TV. A ride in the hotel's spastically shuddering elevator makes you feel truly alive. The hotel also has a nourishing restaurant (see p260).

**Anna Kristina Hotel** (☎ 606 038; www.annakristinahotel.com; ul Baba Vida 2; d/apt from 50/150 lv; ☎) The most luxurious place in Vidin, the Anna Kristina is also quite good value. It's set in a quiet park midway down the riverside and has a large, gated pool with bar (7 lv extra). The rooms border on posh, though the bristly carpets conflict with the chic,

raised-tile bathrooms. The eye-catching apartments have lofty ceilings and mottled painted cupolas.

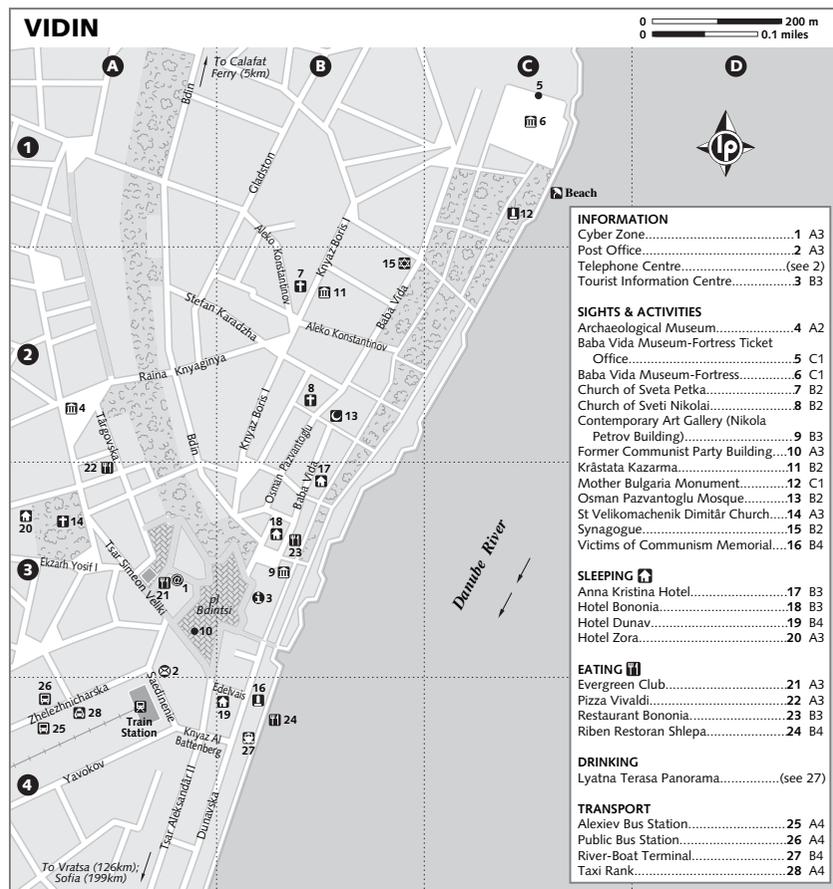
**Hotel Zora** (☎ 606 330; www.hotelzora.hit.bg in Bulgarian; ul Naycho Tsanov 3a; s/d/apt 55/72/90 lv; ☎) Overlooking the Sveti Velikomachenik Dimitar church, Hotel Zora is a well-kept and friendly place. All rooms have balcony, minibar, TV and even bathtubs.

## Eating &amp; Drinking

Vidin has a few decent eateries, and some cafés, though they're fairly subdued. The most popular are off the south side of the square before the Danube. There are no river views from most restaurants or cafés, thanks to the high river wall blocking views.

**Pizza Vivaldi** (☎ 609 334; ul Naycho Tsanov 2; mains 4–7 lv) In a garden setting under umbrellas, the Vivaldi does good pizzas and salads. It's also a relaxing place for a drink. It's not well signposted; peek inside the narrow gate half-way along ul Naycho Tsanov.

**Evergreen Club** (off pl Bdintsi; mains 4–7 lv) This oddly named standby is for those seeking a traditional Bulgarian *mehana* (tavern). It's



cosy, but can get loud on weekends, when live music plays.

**Restaurant Bononia** (☎ 606 012; ul Bdin 2; mains 5-11 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) Part of the Hotel Bononia (see p259), this restaurant with a cavernous interior and outer deck facing the park and river is the place for Serbian-style *skara* (grilled meats) prepared on an open grill. Feast on *domashna nadenitza* (homemade sausages), *planena pleskavitza* (hamburger stuffed with cheese and bits of ham) or even *vratna perzhola* (grilled pork neck).

**Riben Restoran Shlepa** (☎ 0887999131; fish 6-10 lv; ☎ noon-11pm) Just because you don't swim in the Danube doesn't mean you can't eat those who do. This canopied boat-restaurant floating in place along the southern riverbank has

a full menu of fish, including sheatfish (*som*), hansen (*moruna*), pike (*byala riba*) and trout (*pasturva*), served either fried or grilled, as well as meat standards and salads. The gentle rocking sensation from river waves helps confuse the senses into thinking you need more of the delicious Bavarian beer. There are tables inside and out; reserve in advance for the upper circle seating with the best views.

**Lyatna Terasa Panorama** (☎ 601 321; ☎ 8am-1am May-Sep) On a sturdy deck above the Port Authority building (Rechna Gara), the 'Summer Terrace' offers great river views and a reasonable drinks selection. The outdoors café is open when the weather's good, while the billiards hall indoors is open year round.

## THE DANUBE

The Danube is the second-longest (472km) river in Europe. Called the Dunav by Bulgarians and other Slavic peoples, it rises in the Black Forest of southwestern Germany and empties into the Black Sea. It travels through four capital cities (Vienna, Budapest, Bratislava and Belgrade) and nine countries (Germany, Austria, Slovakia, Hungary, Serbia, Bulgaria, Romania, Moldova and Ukraine). No other river is shared by so many countries. The Danube's average depth is about 5m and the water rarely flows faster than 3km/h.

In January 2000, a tailings dam burst at a gold mine in Baia Mare, a town in Romania. About 100,000 cu metres of cyanide-contaminated water spilt into the Tisa and Danube Rivers, killing thousands of fish and birds. Described as the worst environmental disaster in Europe since Chernobyl, the spill poisoned river systems in Romania, Hungary, Bulgaria, Ukraine and Serbia. While the most affected parts are slowly starting to recover, experts believe that wildlife habitats will not return to normal before about 2010.

## Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (ul Zhelezhnicharska) is on Vidin's south side, roughly opposite the train station. As elsewhere in Bulgaria, numerous small offices represent the different bus companies and sell tickets, though often you'll be buying on board. Across from this station is the **Alexiev Bus Station** (☎ 606 190; ul Zhelezhnicharska), home of the Alexiev bus line, the major company for the Sofia-Vidin route.

From these two stations 14 daily buses go to Sofia (14 lv, four hours) via Vratsa (8 lv). Six daily serve Belogradchik (4.50 lv, one hour), with one connection to Pleven (8 lv, 3½ hours).

The **train station** (☎ 606 050; ul Saedinenie) has four daily trains to Sofia, three fast (1st/2nd class 12.90/10.30 lv, four hours) and one slow (9 lv, five hours). These trains travel via Vratsa (7 lv), which has frequent connections to Mezra, for going further east to Ruse and Varna. Some trains from Vidin also stop in Gara Oreshets, the nearest train station (9km away) to Belogradchik (2nd/1st class 3.60/4.50 lv).

## TO/FROM ROMANIA

With the long-anticipated bridge between Vidin and Calafat not yet begun, the 'ferry boat' (as Bulgarians, too, call it) provides the only daily service to Romania (8 lv, 15 minutes). The ferry terminal is 2km north of town; take a taxi (4 lv) from the train station's taxi rank. The boats, operated by one Bulgarian and one Romanian company, theoretically go in the morning, afternoon and evening, but won't leave unless they're full, so you might end up having to wait, though you will eventually get there.

## TO/FROM SERBIA

With the discontinuation of the international bus line for Negotin in eastern Serbia, you must either backtrack to Sofia to find a Belgrade-bound bus, or take a taxi from Vidin to the Vrushka Chuka (20 lv) border, walk across and find a bus from there. Double-check at the bus station in case the bus service has resumed.

## BELOGRADCHIK БЕЛОГРАДЧИК

☎ 0936 / pop 6700

The crisp mountain air and the weird and wonderful rock formations rising from a lonely hill are what draw visitors to little Belogradchik, on the eastern edge of the Stara Planina mountain range. Although somewhat forlorn, with its eternal quietude and a few rusting reminders of communist industry, Belogradchik's charms are starting to attract more visitors, with guesthouses and even a four-star hotel now under construction. Nevertheless, it's still a somewhat ornery, out-of-the-way place, where time moves slowly, even in summer.

However, if visiting Belogradchik in June, check out the town festival in honour of patron St Peter, which brings well-known Bulgarian singers, dancing, folklore and copious amounts of food and drink to the town from 25 to 30 June.

## Orientation & Information

From the bus station, head uphill one block to the main square, situated at the junction of Belogradchik's three major roads. Facing you to the left stands a large board with a map listing hotels and sights. To the right, ul Treti Mart leads to the fortress (*krepost*).

## LEGENDS OF THE ROCKS

For centuries, the Belogradchik rock formations have fired the imaginations of local people. These twisting, contorted pillars of stone seem to take on shapes human and animal, fluid creations that become especially inscrutable through the constant shifting of light and shadows and during the glow of sunset.

As with similar sites around the world, this anthropomorphic element has inspired numerous legends and myths about the rocks, tales that can be as bleak and beguiling as the landscape itself. One such legend retells the tragically uplifting tale of Valentina, a beautiful nun who was turned to stone. Every night, a lovesick shepherd would inflame young Valentina's passions by playing seductively on his flute beneath her window, until she finally slid down a rope from her cell. Not too long after, the cries of a child were heard in the monastery; the shepherd came for his beloved, but the monks fought fiercely to protect her. Then God pitched in, sending thunder, earthquakes and storms to destroy the convent. All of the people were turned to stone where they stood – the monks, the shepherd on his horse, and the nun Valentina with a baby in her arms.

This, the legend of the 'Madonna', and other marvellous tales of the rocks of Belogradchik are narrated on large signs within the Kaleto Fortress, right beneath the rocks. With a little imagination, you can make up your own myths, too, about these eerily lifelike wonders of nature.

There's a First East National Bank near the bus station for changing money.

An **internet café** (ul Knyaz Boris I; per hr 1 lv; ☎ 24hr) stands between the pink art gallery and the white history museum (look for the 'JAR Computers' sign). The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 4294; milena-tourist\_centre@abv.bg; ul Poruchik Dvoryanov 5; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) can help with accommodation and gives out maps.

## Sights

### BEOGRADCHIK ROCKS & KALETO FORTRESS

The massive **Belogradchik rock formations** tower over the town, at the end of a 2km-long road that passes around them. Seamlessly blended in with these bizarre wonders of nature is the **Kaleto Fortress** (admission 5 lv, guided tour 5 lv, photo/video 2/5 lv; ☎ 8am-6.30pm), built by the Romans in the 1st century BC. The fortress was later augmented and expanded with towers, walls and gates by the Byzantines and Bulgars. The remaining sections, interwoven with the rocks, date mostly from the late Ottoman period (between 1805 and 1837). There's no need to pay for the offered tour, as the fortress is fairly self-explanatory and scattered signs tell the stories and legends associated with the place (see the boxed text, above). Likewise, despite the stated ban on photos, no-one will accost you for snapping pictures; the breathtaking views of the town below and other rock formations behind are certainly great photo opportunities.

Entering the fortress is simple, but access to the highest rocks, where the best views can be had, involves narrow and steep metal ladders and is thus unsafe for small children. In any case, you can admire the ramparts, explore the defensive bunkers and peek into the dimly lit former living quarters (a torch is helpful here). These 200-million-year-old rock formations, spread over 200 hectares, have a certain Stonehenge-like quality to them and are an excellent place for solitary reflection and relaxation. A shady forest stands outside the fortress. Other impressive (but smaller) examples of rock formations are back in town, about 100m down the road from the main square (follow the track to the Nature Department of the History Museum).

Getting to the well-signposted fortress requires driving or walking 2km from the main square up ul Treti Mart. You'll pass a decrepit **Ottoman mosque** on your left-hand side. About 200 years old, the mosque has pretty floral designs above the door but is locked and derelict inside.

Outside the fortress, there's a small café patio near the ticket booth.

### MUSEUMS

The **History Museum** (☎ 3469; pl 1850 Leto; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri), also known as Panova's House, has exhibits comprising coins, jewellery and costumes, as well as 6000 or so Kaleto artefacts. Other exhibits concentrate on mid-19th century anti-Turkish revolutionaries.

Affiliated with the history museum is the **Nature Department** (admission 4 lv), which displays unusual local flora and fauna. To get there, proceed from the Hotel Belogradchiski Skali up ul Vasil Levski, turn right, and follow the path down for 600m. From here there are great views over the Belogradchik rocks.

## Sleeping & Eating

The two former state-run hotels – the Hotel Belogradchiski Skali, on the square, and the Hotel Belogradchik, one street below – have been neglected and closed, though at the time of writing the former was being transformed into a four-star hotel. New guesthouses have also opened over the past couple of years, but there are not enough restaurants to keep up with demand. Nightlife is relegated to a few café-bars on the main street and a weekend disco blaring *chalga* (Bulgarian folk-pop music).

**our pick** **Guesthouse Drakite** (☎ 0888713539; www.drakite.com; ul Treti Mart 37; s/d 12/24 lv) This cosy new guesthouse, 600m down from the Kaleto entrance in a quiet residential area, offers five airy, modern rooms with wood furnishings, TV and wireless internet. Three rooms have shared bathrooms, the other two having their own. Views are of the Kaleto rocks and fortress above, or of the long valley below. Friendly owner Angel Boyanov speaks excellent English and can arrange local activities, such as hiking or guided hunting and fishing tours. The Drakite is about 1km west of the centre; you can walk there (15 minutes), or phone ahead and Angel will retrieve you for free from the Belogradchik bus station or from the train station in Oreshets.

**Hotel Rai** (☎ 3735; s/d 25/30 lv, r with shared bathroom 20 lv) Facing the bus station, the Hotel Rai has modern if basic rooms. The staff are frequently absent, so ring ahead.

**The Rocks Hotel** (☎ 4002; ul Hadzhi Dimitri 1; hotel\_skalite@belogradchik.info; d 30 lv) This reasonable budget option is a two-minute walk from the bus station, and around the corner from the town centre above it. The clean rooms have modern bathrooms and the restaurant downstairs is worthwhile. While reception is closed from 2pm to 5pm, banging on the restaurant door eventually rouses out a worker to check you in. Locals sometimes call the hotel by its former name, Sveti (Saint) Valentin.

**Hotel Madona** (☎ 5546; www.hotelmadona.hit.bg in Bulgarian; ul Hristo Botev 26; s/d 30/40 lv, with shared bathroom 25/30 lv) More like a guesthouse, the Madona

has cosy traditional-style rooms, 600m up from the main square (it's signposted). The restaurant is one of the few, and therefore one of the best, in town.

**Restaurant Elit** (☎ 4558; ul Yuri Gagarin 2; mains 4-6 lv; ☎ 9am-midnight) Aside from Belogradchik's two hotel restaurants, the Elit is the only other real restaurant in town. It does some fine – and unusual – chicken specialties, as well as a variety of other Bulgarian dishes. It's an uphill walk (600m) up steep ul Vasil Levski and then off to the left.

## Getting There & Away

From the desultory **bus station** (☎ 3427), three or four daily buses serve Vidin (4.50 lv, 1½ hours). A 7am bus serves Sofia (11 lv, four hours), via Montana (but not Vratsa). The three daily buses that serve the train station, 9km away at Gara Oreshets (1 lv, 20 minutes), are timed to meet the Sofia-bound train. Several daily trains from Gara Oreshets serve Vidin (3.60 lv, 30 minutes), Vratsa (6.10 lv, 20 minutes) and Sofia (8.40 lv, three hours, 30 minutes).

A taxi from Belogradchik to Gara Oreshets train station costs 5 lv. For very early morning trains, taxis wait in front of the bus depot.

## CHIPROVTSI ЧИПРОВЦИ

☎ 09554 / pop 3000

Famous for its traditional carpets and unusual monastery, Chiprovtsi (*Chip-rov-tsi*) is a quiet village slowly embracing tourism, as the recent opening of new guesthouses indicates. Still, it's essentially a placid small town tucked into the foothills of the Stara Planina mountains, and even quieter than Belogradchik.

## Information

The **Chiprovtsi Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 2910, 0885258405; tic.chiprovci@gmail.com), in the centre of town, provides information about local attractions and finds accommodation.

## Sights

### CHIPROVTSI MONASTERY

Originally built in the 15th century, probably as a Catholic church, this monastery, also known as **Sveti Ivan Rilski Monastery** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk), suffered the fate of many Bulgarian churches, being burned during the Ottoman occupation when the monks sheltered rebel fighters. The structure that survives today dates from the 1830s, when it

was rebuilt. The turn-off to the monastery is 5.8km northeast of Chiprovtsi village; take any bus between Montana and Chiprovtsi. From the turn-off, it's 400m to the monastery.

### HISTORY MUSEUM

Local minerals, Ottoman-era exhibits and copies of murals from Chiprovtsi Monastery (the originals are in the Aleksander Nevski Memorial Church in Sofia) are displayed at this small **museum** (☎ 2194; ul Vitoshka 2; admission 1 lv, free Thu; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 9am-5pm Sat & Sun), which also showcases traditional costumes and the renowned Chiprovtsi carpets. The caretaker offers English-language **guided tours** (per person 3 lv). The museum is above the concrete steps to the right when facing the square from the main road.

### Sleeping & Eating

Neither the monastery nor the museum currently provides accommodation. The best eating is in the guesthouses' restaurants. Chiprovtsi's few cafés are centred on the main square.

**Guesthouse Kipro** (☎ 2974; migatas@mail.bg; Balkanska 44; s/d/apt 10/20/40 lv) A new guesthouse, the Kipro is a friendly place (though no English is spoken) decorated with traditional Bulgarian dress and tools. The owners serve good homemade meals, and even offer lessons in carpet-weaving.

**Guesthouse Pavlova Káshta** (☎ 2242; office\_gl@videx.bg; ul Pavleto 17; s/d 15/30 lv) Another new guesthouse built in the mid-19th century National Revival style, the Pavlova Káshta occupies a handsome white stone building with wood shutters. Rooms are simple, though breezy and clean. The adjacent *mehana* does good Bulgarian meals.

**Guesthouse Stavrovata Káshta** (☎ 2854; ul Dimitar Filipov 1; d 15 lv) This relaxing house, closed for renovation at the time of writing, has a lawn and barbecue, plus a small pool and Jacuzzi. The owners give out portions of the famous Chiprovtsi carpets as souvenirs.

### Shopping

Despite being a centuries-old local tradition, Chiprovtsi's handmade woollen carpet production trade has waned. Your best bet for finding something is the museum, which offers tiny bags (about 5 lv) and small rugs (15 lv). You can also order larger items through the museum (it takes one month for delivery).

Alternately, the museum caretaker can find local weavers with products for sale.

### Getting There & Away

Four or five daily buses connect Montana and Chiprovtsi. The road to Chiprovtsi from the Vratsa-Vidin highway (E79) starts 3km northwest of Montana. From the south, the turn-off is signposted 'Чипровски Манастир'; from the north, it's signposted 'Lopushanski' in English.

### LOPUSHANSKI MONASTERY

Some 21km west of Montana, this small **monastery** (admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm), completed in 1853, enjoys a serene setting and boasts valuable icons painted by brothers Stanislav and Nikolai Dospevski. During the periodic rebellions against Ottoman rule, Lopushanski (also known as St John the Precursor) provided a safe haven for revolutionaries.

The monastery's **guesthouse** (☎ 095-51 350; r per person about 20 lv) is only metres from the monastery itself. The guesthouse has 20 rooms, older ones downstairs with shared bathrooms, and newer ones upstairs with bathrooms, refrigerators and smart furniture. The attached café has outdoor and indoor seating, a peaceful location and decent food.

### MONTANA MOHTAHA

☎ 096 / pop 54,600

The main transport hub for Chiprovtsi or Lopushanski Monastery, this prosaic large town set between Vratsa and Vidin has nothing in common with its accidental American namesake. There are manageable rooms at the **Montana Hotel** (☎ 626 803; pl Slaveikov; s/d with TV 30/40 lv) if you choose to linger, though an overnight stay is not really warranted.

That said, one pleasant enough local diversion along the road from Montana to Lopushanski Monastery is the **Montana Reservoir**, popular for swimming and fishing. Note that there's no shade, so bring sunscreen and an umbrella (as well as fishing gear if required).

From Montana's **bus station** (☎ 623 454) buses go almost hourly to Sofia, Vratsa and Vidin. Four or five daily buses serve Chiprovtsi, Kopilovtsi, Plevn and Belogradchik. The inconvenient **train station** (☎ 623 846) is on a spur track from the major line between Sofia and Vidin.

### VRATSA BPAAIA

☎ 092 / pop 78,900

With its striking location just below a steep defile in the Vrachanska Mountains, Vratsa makes a handy base for exploring the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park (p266), Lopushanski and Cherepish Monasteries, and other local villages. It has necessary services and elementary café life, though the town itself retains the drab concrete aesthetic of Soviet times. Nevertheless, new accommodation options existing or being built at the time of writing have increased Vratsa's viability as an overnight destination.

### Orientation & Information

The centre of Vratsa is the pl Hristo Botev, crowned by a statue of the 19th-century revolutionary associated with Vratsa (see the boxed text, p266). Kiosks, shops and services congregate around this square, though most of the action is further east along the pedestrian mall (ul Hristo Botev), which finishes at the market, near the train station. Numerous banks here change money and offer ATMs.

For information, maps and advice about the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park, visit the **Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park headquarters** (☎ 633 149; infocenter@vratsa.net; ul Ivanka Boteva 1).

### Sights & Activities

#### HISTORICAL MUSEUM

Also called the 'Archaeological Museum', Vratsa's local **museum** (☎ 620 220; pl Hristo Botev; adult/student 5/0.50 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-6.30pm Tue-Sun) displays Thracian coins and jewellery, artefacts from nearby Neolithic dwellings and Macedonia-related historical items. The museum is behind the 16th-century tower to the left (west) of Hotel Valdi Palace (right) as you face it.

#### ETHNOGRAPHIC COMPLEX

Closed for renovations at the time of writing, the Ethnographic Complex or **Regional Historical Museum with Art Gallery** (☎ 620 209; ul Gen Leonov; adult/student 5/0.50 lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Sat) is made up of structures evoking the Bulgarian National Revival, and even British Tudor, styles of architecture. Traditional costumes and objects relating to author and musician Diko Iliev are displayed. The off-beat **Museum of Carriages**, at the back, boasts an assortment of vintage buggies and carts.

A relaxing stroll takes you through the nearby museum **gardens**. The adjacent **Sveti Sofronni Vrachanski Church** (ul Gen Leonov; ☎ 8am-7pm) is also worth seeing. Get there from the central square along ul Hristo Botev, and turn right along the cobblestone lane of ul Gen Leonov.

### HIKING

Relaxed hiking in the forested hills southwest of the main square, and tougher treks along the river road towards the Ledenika Cave highlight Vratsa's outdoors activities (several marked hiking trails exist). Rock climbing – for the truly fearless only – is performed on the sheer mountain cliffs that straddle the road.

### Sleeping & Eating

Discreet, unofficial camping is possible in and around the Vrachanski Balkan Nature Park (p266). There are no standout restaurants in Vratsa; for eateries and cafés, try the eastern end of the pedestrian mall.

At the time of writing, the old Hotel Tourist was being resurrected as a new five-star hotel to be called Hotel Park Vratsa. The hotel will be along the road to Ledenika Cave, about 300m past the Historical Museum.

**Hotel Valdi Palace** (☎ 624 150; pl Hristo Botev; s 35-50 lv, d 40-60 lv, apt 60-80 lv) The central Valdi, on the far eastern side of the pedestrian mall, has a startling communist appearance from without, but actually offers clean, modern rooms and friendly service within. Its restaurant is popular with locals.

**our pick** **Hotel Chaika** (☎ 621 369; www.chaika.net; at the gorge; d 40-50 lv, apt 70-150 lv) The spectacular location of this brand-new hotel, right at the mouth of the gorge, in itself makes it worthwhile to stay in Vratsa. A sloping-roofed place with a ski-lodge look, it boasts modern rooms with charm and spacious apartments, some with Jacuzzis. Rooms above ground level have stunning views of the enormous peaks on either side of the defile. The hotel restaurant has a relaxing summer patio, and there's even a duck pond (minus the ducks), and paddle-boats for guests. Although service is a bit frumpy and the décor not exactly chic, the Chaika makes an excellent base for hill walks, climbing and general escapist bliss. A taxi from the bus/train station costs 2 lv to 4 lv.

**Restaurant Atlantik** (pl Hristo Botev; mains 3 lv) This undercover and off-street complex near the

### VRATSA'S TRAGIC POET

Bulgaria's most revered poet was also a revolutionary who died a tragically inspirational death. Hristo Botev was born in 1848, son of Botyo Petkov (1815–69), a teacher and one of the main figures in the Bulgarian National Revival. The father's national fervour inspired the son, who in 1863 went to study in Odessa, making contacts with like-minded Russian and Polish revolutionary thinkers. After daring to speak out against the Ottoman rule upon his return to Bulgaria four years later, Botev was exiled to Romania, where the liberation movement was bubbling along. There he befriended the great Bulgarian rebel leader, Vasil Levski, and agitated through newspaper broadsides for the national cause.

In late 1872, Levski was captured by the Ottomans and executed, causing the Bulgarian rebel movement to splinter between those who, like the impetuous young poet, urged immediate action, and a more conservative faction that feared the time was not yet ripe for a general rebellion. The latter's circumspection appeared justified when the 1876 'April Uprising' was brutally crushed by the Turks. This event deeply affected Botev, who, despite his lack of prior military training, organised a detachment to fight the Turks.

First, however, he had to escape Romania. Botev and his men hijacked an Austro-Hungarian vessel on the Danube and, after stirring the emotions of the foreign passengers with the announcement of their valiant and apparently suicidal purpose, were dropped off on the Bulgarian side of the river. They made for Vratsa and the mountains – with the Ottoman army and *bashibazouk* irregulars (mercenaries) in hot pursuit.

In the three-day battle that followed, Botev and his 200 men fought heroically, driving back the far more numerous Turks several times before being overwhelmed. During a lull in the fighting, when the poet stood to survey the enemy lines from a distance, a single bullet pierced his heart. With the death of the brave Botev, the few surviving rebels despaired and were routed. Nevertheless, historians believe that Botev's rebellion affected the course of events leading to Russia's entry into the war the following year, and thus accelerated Bulgaria's path to freedom.

Every year on 2 June, the anniversary of his death, Hristo Botev's memory is observed in a ceremony in the Vrachanska Mountains and in the Vratsa town square that bears his name.

Hotel Valdi Palace includes an internet café, a regular café, a bar and a restaurant that offers tasty food, excellent service and live music.

### Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 622 558) is slightly hidden from the main road, 300m east of the train station. Buses travel to/from Sofia (8 lv, two hours) hourly (more frequently between 6am and 9am). One or two buses daily serve Gabrovo, Pleven and Lovech, plus four to Vidin.

Inside the **train station** (☎ 624 415), the **Rila Bureau** (☎ 620 562) sells tickets for international trains and advance tickets for domestic services. Five daily trains serve Sofia, six go to Montana and four to Vidin; the latter pass through Gara Oreshets, from where you can get to Belogradchik.

For more distant destinations, connecting to the nearby Mezra train station (20 minutes south) and changing there is recommended. From Mezra four daily trains serve northern Bulgarian destinations such as Pleven, Ruse

(11.50 lv, seven hours) and Varna (15.70 lv), plus there's one daily to Dobrich (16.90 lv) and Silistra (18.20 lv). There are also frequent trains to Sofia (4.50 lv, two hours).

### Getting Around

Vratsa itself is easily walkable, though the gorge is 2km behind the town. However, taxis are plentiful and cheap. Taxis are also useful for Ledenika Cave (below) and Cherepish Monastery (opposite).

### VRACHANSKI BALKAN NATURE PARK

Numerous species of birds, 700 types of trees and about 500 caves distinguish this nature park of 288 sq km, located southwest of Vratsa. While some of the rocky outcroppings are fragile, they're still open for rock climbers and hang-gliders. Unfortunately, the park's more accessible parts are marred by abandoned hotels and a disused chairlift.

Named after the Bulgarian word for ice (*led*), the **Ledenika Cave** (guided tours per person 5 lv; ☎ 8am–6pm summer) is indeed sheathed in ice for

much of the winter, but thaws out in summer, when visitors on guided tours arrive to explore it. While most come on a sunny summer afternoon, a unique time to see Ledenika is for the periodic concerts held within its chilly confines.

The cave is about 15km (or three hours on foot) from the road that starts by the former Hotel Tourist in Vratsa, where it's signposted. The hourly bus from Vratsa to Zgorigrad will leave you near the cave if you alert the driver. The cafés also have directions to the new **Vrachanski Ecotrail**.

The **park headquarters** (☎ 092-633 149; infocenter@vratsa.net; ul Ivanka Boteva 1, Vratsa) provides information on hiking and caving expeditions.

### CHEREPIH MONASTERY

The 14th-century **Cherepish Monastery** (☎ 0897 312770; admission free; ☎ 24hr) was, like Chiprovtsi's, torched, toppled and rebuilt repeatedly during the Ottoman period. Like many other monasteries, it was used by rebels as a hiding place before and during the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78).

The monastery's little **museum** displays icons and has Bulgarian-language books about the monastery and local history.

The poorly signposted monastery is 600m from the eponymous roadside restaurant on the Mezdra–Zverino route. Buses from Sofia heading towards Mezdra, Vratsa, Montana or Vidin pass the monastery; disembark at the Zverino turn-off and wait for a connecting minibus, or walk west 6km. If driving from Sofia, the most aesthetically appealing approach is definitely the scenic, if slower, road through the stunning Iskár Gorge, via Novi Iskár.

### RUSE PYCE

☎ 082 / pop 182,500

Cultured Ruse (*roo-seh*), the fifth-biggest city in Bulgaria, is far more than just a point of passage to Romania, though for many it's just a stop on the way to or from Bucharest. Yet with its grand square enlivened by cafés and Austro-Hungarian-influenced architecture, often illuminated to great effect at night, Ruse is a very appealing and lively town with a rich and varied history. This past is abundantly displayed in several museums, and in its ruined Roman fortress, standing guard high over the Danube.

Indeed, considering that Ruse features such sites, and boasts the best dining and nightlife in northern Bulgaria, there's plenty to keep you for a few days. Ruse's also a base for visiting the nearby rock monasteries and other attractions at Rusenski Lom Nature Park (p273).

Already a key Balkan commercial transport hub, there are ambitious plans to build a new industrial zone south of Ruse, as well as a foreign-owned car factory, indicating that the city's economic importance is still growing – though such developments are not particularly encouraging for the local environment.

For more information on local wineries, see p66.

### History

The Port of 60 Ships, *Sexaginta Prista*, was the grandiose name given to the key fortress built here by the Romans, around AD 69–70. From its position high on a bluff, the fortress stood guard over the Danube – the traditional border between the empire and the barbarian hordes – and ensured safe passage for commercial ships. Byzantine Emperor Justinian improved the fortress in the 6th century, but invading Slavic tribes destroyed it soon afterwards. The chronic Slavic raids caused most of Ruse's inhabitants to move to Cherven, 35km south and now within the Rusenski Lom Nature Park.

Ruse remained relatively forgotten during the First (681–1018) and Second (1185–1396) Bulgarian Empires. Its complete destruction by the invading Ottomans in the 14th century presaged, however, a period of unprecedented greatness. A reforming Turkish district governor, Midhat Pasha, rebuilt and revitalised the town, known to the Turks as Roustchouk. It developed great economic and cultural importance and, in 1866, became the first station on the first railway in the entire Ottoman Empire, linking the Danube with the Black Sea at Varna.

Ruse also became a centre for anti-Turkish agitation during the 19th-century revolutionary period, when Bucharest, just a few hours to the north, was the headquarters of the Bulgarian Central Revolutionary Committee. By the end of the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78), Ruse was the largest, most prosperous city in Bulgaria; the legacy of those halcyon days lingers on in the lovely turn-of-the-century architecture found across the city centre.



crosses and icons are the standouts here, as are the tower's stained-glass windows. The bell tower was a post-Ottoman addition from the late 19th century.

The **Catholic Church of St Paul the Crucified** (admission free; ☎ 7am-6pm), just off ul Pridunavski, was completed in 1892. Its original murals, stained-glass windows, chandeliers and icons survive. St Paul's was the first Bulgarian church equipped with an organ, and they still fire up the 700-pipe monster for Sunday mass.

## MUSEUMS

**Ruse Regional Museum of History** (☎ 825 006; www.museumruse.com; ul Aleksandar Battenberg 3; ☎ 9am-5pm) is a new history museum containing prehistoric, Roman and medieval Bulgarian archaeological finds, taken from the Roman fortress and other local sites.

The unique **Transportation Museum** (☎ 803 516; ul Bratya Obretenovi 5; admission outside/indoor displays 4/2 lv; ☎ 10am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-Fri) exhibits vintage locomotives from the late 19th and early 20th centuries, as well as carriages that once belonged to Balkan luminaries such as Tsar Boris III, Tsar Ferdinand and Turkish Sultan Abdul Aziz. A photo display documents the development of communications and mass transport in Ruse.

The **Museum of the Urban Lifestyle in Ruse** (☎ 820 997; ul Tsar Ferdinand 39; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Sat) was built in 1866 and features early-20th-century crockery, cutlery, porcelain and costumes. The elegant furnishings date to the same period. The museum is alternatively known as the Kaliopa House. According to legend, the Turkish governor, Midhat Pasha, gave the house to his reputed mistress, Calliope, the beautiful Greek wife of the Prussian ambassador.

Revolutionary hero Zahari Stoyanov and his firearms collection, along with sabres and early photographs, are commemorated at the **Zahari Stoyanov House-Museum** (☎ 820 996; ul Pridunavski 12; adult/student 3/0.50 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Sat).

## ROMAN FORTRESS OF SEXAGINTA PRISTA

Defensive walls, a tower, some barracks and a storage area are what remain of this once great fortress (☎ 825 004; ul Tsar Kaloyan 2; adult/concession 2/1 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Sat), completed in AD 70. Around 600 soldiers once stood guard here, guaranteeing safe passage for

river traders from their high bluff over the river. Stone inscriptions, decorative sculptures and tombstones are also displayed, and background information is posted in English. The friendly staff will show you around, and, if you're interested, to the somewhat more recent **German Bunker**, hewn out of bricks in WWII and still marvellously intact. Other ancient finds are kept in the cool confines of the underground bunker.

## CANETTI TRADE HOUSE

The grandfather of Bulgarian Jewish writer Elias Canetti (1905-94), winner of the Nobel Prize for literature, built this fine house at ul Slayvanska 9. The cosmopolitan Canetti spoke Ladino, Bulgarian, German and English, embodying the spirit of *fin-de-siècle* Ruse, a city marked by its mixed nationalities and cultures. The house is now a private residence, so you can only look on from outside.

## PARKS & MONUMENTS

The **Park na Vazrozhdeniye** (Park of the Revivalists), lined with the graves of local revolutionary heroes, is dominated by the gold-domed **Pantheon of the National Revival** (☎ 820 998; admission free; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm). This grand achievement of Soviet monumentalism was built in 1978, to commemorate the 100th anniversary of the death of 453 Ruse-area natives who fought the Ottomans in the Russo-Turkish War. Their remains are inside.

North of the Pantheon, at the end of ul Saedinie, is the **Soviet Army Monument**, built in 1949. Behind this is the **Youth Park**, with playgrounds, swimming pools, tennis courts and good river views.

## Festivals & Events

**March Music Days Festival** (last two weeks of March)

Features international musicians.

**Golden Rebeck Folklore Festival** (early June)

**Ruse Jazz Bluezz Festival** (September)

**Days of Ruse Festival** (early October) Music, dance and theatre.

**Christmas Festival** (15-24 December)

## Sleeping BUDGET

The **Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 824 704; tic@tic.rouse.bg; ul Aleksandrovska 61; r per person from 10 lv; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-6pm Sat & Sun) can find private rooms; **Dunav Tours** (☎ 825 051; travel@dunavtours.bg; ul Olimpi Panov 5; s/d 22/35 lv;

## THE DANUBE BRIDGE

Some 6km downstream from Ruse, this double-decker highway and railway bridge finished in 1954 links the city with Giurgiu on the Romanian side of the Danube. At 2.8km in length, and towering 30m above the water, it's the largest steel bridge in Europe.

In a nod to the neighbourly bickering between Bulgarians and Romanians, the Soviets named it the Friendship Bridge. Whatever filial sentiments this act may have inspired were sorely tested in the 1980s, when a Romanian chlorine-and-sodium plant caused massive air pollution and health problems in Ruse. More recently, locals suffered the misfortune of another catastrophic spill in Romania (see the boxed text, p261). In the wake of these incidents the bridge has come to denote friendship no more, but mere functionality; it's now known simply as the Danube Bridge.

☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) can also help you, though its rooms tend to be more expensive.

**our pick The English Guest House** (☎ 824 120, 088326313; babatonka@gmail.com; ul Baba Tonka 24; s/d 30/45 lv) By far the best budget option in Ruse, The English Guest House has five lovely double rooms with shared, but spacious and immaculate modern bathrooms, in an artfully restored 150-year-old mansion. The guesthouse is owned and run by charismatic Englishman Steve Molyneux, who can do pick-ups from the train or bus station. There is free laundry service, sauna, wireless internet, a relaxing back garden and a lounge/kitchen with a communal fridge.

**National Hotel** (☎ 824 120; fax 834 915; ul Nikolaevska 51; s&d 40 lv) A 15-minute walk from pl Svoboda, the National has basic but clean rooms.

**Hotel Kristal** (☎ 824 333; hotel\_kristal@abv.bg; ul Nikolaevska 1; s/d/t 40/56/70 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) The renovated but somewhat out-of-the-way Kristal attracts business travellers and tour groups. However, it's a fine, comfortable hotel with helpful staff. Rooms are clean, but bathrooms are small.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Liliya** (☎ 822 900; ul Zlatan Rog 1; s/d 60/80 lv; ☎ ☎) The Liliya, almost down by the river off the central square, offers decent accommodation; it's nothing special for the price, but a good fallback option if others are booked. A small bar and restaurant are downstairs.

**Splendid Hotel** (☎ 825 972; www.splendid.rouse.bg; ul Aleksandrovska 51; s/d 68/80 lv; ☎ ☎) Off on a side street near the main square, the Splendid offers comfortable if unspectacular rooms.

## TOP END

**Bistra & Galina Hotel** (☎ 823 344; www.bghotel.bg; ul Han Asparukh 8; s 90-100 lv/d 120-140 lv; ☎ ☎) The swank Bistra & Galina has excellent rooms with all

the mod cons, though the singles are small. It's part of the Best Western international chain.

**Anna Palace** (☎ 825 005; www.annapalace.com; ul Knyazheska 4; s/d 110/140 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) In a bright yellow neoclassical mansion by the river terminal, the luxurious (if a bit garish in places) Anna Palace has comfortable rooms and a professional staff. There are smaller, discounted attic singles. The hotel features one of Ruse's more elegant restaurants.

**Danube Plaza Hotel** (☎ 822 929; www.danubeplaza.com; pl Svoboda 5; s/d 130/200 lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) The lively Danube Plaza overlooks the square. Rooms are spacious, bathrooms large, and amenities just as expected.

## Eating

**Khlebozavod Ruse** (ul Aleksandrovska; banitsa 0.60 lv; ☎ 8am-4pm) A busy take-away place on the pedestrian mall near bul Tsar Osvoboditel, this little shop sells an array of *banitsa* (cheese pasties) and similar morning-hours snacks.

**Ali Baba** (cnr Aleksandrovska & Rakovski; mains 2 lv; ☎ 8am-11pm) Quick and tasty chicken *shishle*, kebabs, falafel and meat wraps for takeaway or eating at the outdoor tables.

**Del Cano** (pl Sveta Troitsa 15; mains 4-6 lv) A tasty lunch spot on the square's far side.

**our pick Mehana Chiflika** (☎ 828 222; ul Otets Paisii 2; mains 5-11 lv; ☎ ☎ 11am-2am) The enormous Chiflika is an excellent *mehana* with traditional furnishings, live music and a wide range of grilled meats. It's a place for hearty eaters, and the rustic charm is only enhanced by the sight of some dishes being served up on what are essentially chipped-off tree stumps.

**Mehana Strandzhata** (☎ 821 185; ul Konstantin Ilichev 5; mains 6-9 lv; ☎ ☎ noon-11pm) Another good spot for Bulgarian cooking, the Strandzhata has indoor seating and an enclosed outside terrace.

**Restaurant Dublin** (ul Tsar Osvoboditel 61; mains 6-10 lv; ☎ ☎ 11am-1am) Yes, it serves Guinness,

but no, it's not a pub; the Dublin is in fact one of the city's better restaurants, with a big menu of inventive Bulgarian and international cuisine.

**Balkan Princess** (☎ 0888270297; pontoon 7, Danube waterfront; mains 6-11 lv, surcharge per person for the trip 5 lv) For Danube dining, take a supper cruise on the *Balkan Princess*, a boat-restaurant that serves plenty of fish and meat, plus cocktails and other drinks from the bar. Since the boat only sails when there's a crowd, you may be dining stationary, though there's no surcharge if so.

**Leventa** (☎ 862 880; www.leventa-bg.net; ul General Kutuzov; mains 10-15 lv; ☎ 11am-midnight) This gourmet eatery is not exactly central, though it is excellent. It boasts a winery, and produces an aromatic red wine characterising the vino of the Danube delta. Food is both inspired Bulgarian and international.

### Drinking

Popular cafés and bars line the pedestrian mall, especially around the main square.

**Fresh** (cnr ul Aleksandrovska & ul Tsar Osvoboditel) This is a popular café that spills out onto the pedestrian mall.

**Deep Club & House** (☎ 834 712; ul Aleksandrovska) Also on ul Aleksandrovska, this cool bar with outdoor seating and a dark, eclectically decorated subterranean section plays a variety of music and is a good chill-out place.

**Camelot** (☎ 861 084; ul Neofit Rilski 48; ☎ 7am-11pm) and **Tropik** (Neofit Rilski 49; ☎ 7am-midnight) are next door to each other just northeast of the centre, in a suburb known for its boisterous, young population. The former has a vaguely English theme, and does good grub, while the latter is a chic and colourful outdoor café for lounging over a drink.

### Entertainment

**Art Club** (☎ 820 948; ul Vazhrzhidane 1; ☎ 9pm-3am) Just across the park, this spacious bar is the place to go for live jazz music (Wednesday to Saturday).

**Soundgarden** (ul Knyazheska 16; ☎ 9am-3am) The once frequent live rock shows held here had become, at the time of writing, sadly rare; nevertheless, this weathered place between the square and the river retains its alternative edge and cultivates a pub ambience.

The **Ruse Opera House** (☎ 825 037; pl Sveta Troitsa), open since about 1890 and one of the town's finest buildings, and the **Sava Ognyanov**

**Drama Theatre** (pl Svoboda), are both well known for their quality productions. Buy tickets at the box offices, or through the Tourist Information Centre.

**Royal Cinema** (ul Olimpi Panov) screens the latest hits.

### Getting There & Away BUS

The **Yug bus station** (☎ 828 151; ul Pristanishtna), about 2.5km south of the city centre, has regular buses to Sofia (10 lv, five hours), Veliko Târnovo (5 lv, two hours), Burgas (11 lv, 4½ hours), Shumen (5.40 lv, two hours), Varna (11 lv, four hours) and Plovdiv (12 lv, six hours). Also, one or two daily public buses go to Gabrovo and Plevan, and two to Dobrich. Buses and minibuses leave for Silistra (5 lv, about two hours) every hour or so. To get to the station, take trolleybus 25 or bus 11 or 12 from ul Borisova. A taxi will cost about 2 lv to 4 lv.

The **Iztok bus station** (☎ 844 064; ul Ivan Vedor 10), 4km east of the centre, has buses to nearby destinations such as Ivanovo and Cherven in the Rusenski Lom Nature Park (opposite). Take a taxi or city bus 2 or 13, which leave from ul Gen Skobelev, near the roundabout four blocks east of ul Borisova.

### To/From Romania

The Ruse-based company **Ovonesovi** (☎ 821 964) runs two minibuses to Bucharest daily, leaving the Yug bus station at 6.30am and 2pm. Tickets are 20 lv one-way or 30 lv return. Buy them either at the station or at Ovonesovi's office on pl Borisova, in front of city hall on the corner of ul Panov. These buses return from Romania at 10.30am and 4.15pm from the Hotel Horoskop on Bucharest's Piazza Uniri. A Romanian company also runs two daily buses from Ruse to Bucharest, at 11.30am and 4.30pm for similar prices.

### TRAIN

The grand **train station** (☎ 820 222; ul Pristanishtna), Bulgaria's oldest, is adjacent to the Yug bus station, about 2.5km from the town's centre. It has four daily train services to both Sofia (14.50 lv, seven hours) and Veliko Târnovo (5.70 lv, two to three hours), and two more to Varna (9 lv, four hours).

For Romania, three daily trains serve Bucharest (20 lv, 3½ hours). Show up at least 30 minutes before the train departure time for customs and passport checks.

In the station, the **Rila Bureau** (☎ 828 016; ☎ 9am-5.30pm & 9pm-5.30am) sells international train tickets. It's best to buy a Bucharest ticket on the day of travel as there are sometimes delays. The train station's **left-luggage office** (☎ 6am-1.30pm & 2-8.30pm) is past the main buildings and in a smaller one up the hill.

To get to the train station, take trolleybus 25 or bus 11 or 12 from ul Borisova. A taxi costs 2 lv to 4 lv.

### Getting Around

Walking central Ruse is easy enough, and plenty of taxis operate. You can also rent bicycles from **Byala Zvezda** (☎ 279 770; apt 25, 2nd fl, entrance B, ul Vidin 10; per day 25 lv). Travel agencies and hotels can advise about car rental, useful for excursions to the Rusenski Lom Nature Park.

## RUSENSKI LOM NATURE PARK ПРИРОДЕН ПАРК РУСЕНСКИ ЛОМ

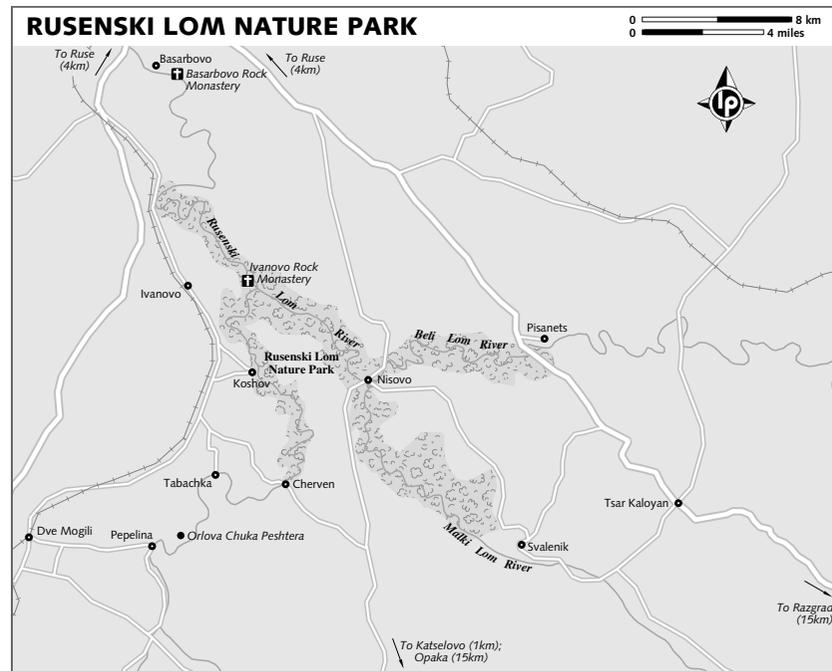
This 3260-hectare nature park, sprawling south of Ruse around the Rusenski Lom, Beli Lom and Malki Lom Rivers, features unique rock monasteries and superb bird-watching. About

170 species of water birds, some endangered, live here. Among the most notable residents are the Egyptian vulture, lesser kestrel and great eagle owl. It's also home to 67 species of mammals (16 of them endangered) and 23 types of bats. The park's endless valleys and mountains (rare among the Danubian plains), were caused by unique prehistoric geological shifts.

Most visitors, however, are drawn first to the park's cliff churches. While around 40 medieval rock churches exist in and around some 300 local caves, only a handful are accessible, the most famous being those of Basarbovo and Ivanovo. The park also contains the second-longest cave in Bulgaria, the Orlova Chuka Peshtera (Eagle Peak Cave), between Tabachka and Pepelina villages. Thracian and Roman ruins are also found here.

### Information

**Information centre** (☎ 081-162 203; Ivanovo town hall)  
**Rusenski Lom Nature Park office** (☎ 082-872 397; www.lomea.org; ul Gen Skobelev 7, Ruse; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) The *Naturpark Russenski Lom* map, published by the Green Danube Program, is indispensable and available here or at bookstalls in Ruse.



## Sights

### BASARBOVO ROCK MONASTERY

The only working rock monastery in Bulgaria, Basarbovo is in the village of the same name 8km south of Ruse near the Rusenski Lom River, on the road to Ivanovo Monastery. Although the latter is more famous and thus gets more visitors, Basarbovo is also worth seeing for its striking frescoes and general aesthetic appeal, carved into a hollow in a high cliff, up a narrow rock stairway of 48 steps. Since you can park right below, it's also easier to reach for those who don't want to climb up the long wooded path at Ivanovo.

Basarbovo Monastery dates from (at least) the 15th century. Adherents of the mystical Hesychasm movement championed by the Byzantine Bishop of Thessaloniki, Gregory Palamas, flocked here. The doctrine, which emphasised inner contemplation and the attainment of spiritual tranquillity, was naturally well suited to the monastic life in remote cliff monasteries such as Basarbovo.

In 1937, the monastery was restored and strengthened by a resident monk, Hrysant, whose coffin is visible in the sepulchral chamber. Other sections of the upper part of the monastery include a small church with carved iconostasis and two monastic cells. At the time of writing, a larger, modern church was being built, just down from the cliff.

### IVANOVO ROCK MONASTERY

The most famous of several former cave churches near Ivanovo village, the Sveti Arhangel Mikhail Monastery complex is also called simply the **Ivanovo Rock Monastery** (☎ 082-231 023; admission 3 lv; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Wed-Mon). This Unesco World Heritage-listed monastery is built inside a cave some 16m long, 4m wide and 38m above ground. It's about a 10-minute walk on a good trail through a forest to get there.

Built during the 13th century by Tsars Ivan Asen II and Ivan Aleksandăr, the monastery soon became a regional centre of art, culture and religion. The 14th-century murals on the walls and ceilings – regarded as some of the finest in Bulgaria – depict various saints and impassioned scenes from the Last Supper. The artists are unknown.

The monastery is signposted along a good road, about 4km east of Ivanovo and 20km south of Ruse.

### CHERVEN ЧЕРВЕВ

Cherven was established in the 6th century by residents of Ruse who wanted to escape chronic Slavic invasions. The town became an important religious, economic and military centre during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396). Remains of the 6th-century **citadel** (☎ 082-230 123; admission 3 lv; 🕒 8am-noon & 1-5pm Wed-Mon) are remarkably intact. Several streets, towers and churches have also been discovered, and though now a protected 'archaeological reserve', you can clamber through it easily enough. There are great views of the river valleys and hills from the top. The ruins are a short walk north of Cherven village, about 15km south of Ivanovo.

## Sleeping

The nature park office in Ruse (p269) and Ivanovo's information centre (p273) provide accommodation options, such as private rooms in Cherven, Pisanets, Nisovo and Koshov (20 lv per person).

## Getting There & Away

From the Iztok bus station in Ruse, four buses leave daily for Cherven, via Ivanovo and Koshov, between Monday and Friday. The best way to get to Ivanovo, however, is by train (every 30 minutes), as there are only three daily buses to Ivanovo in summer, and fewer in winter. For Pisanets, the frequent buses towards Razgrad from the Yug bus station in Ruse will work, and for Nisovo, look for a bus leaving the Iztok station for Opaka.

Ask at the Ruse Tourist Information Centre (p269) for details on getting to Basarbovo via local bus directly from the city centre. In summer, hourly buses go to Basarbovo, though in winter they are less frequent.

## LAKE SREBĂRNA & AROUND

Two of Bulgaria's most important waterways unite at Lake Srebărna, a shallow (1.5m to 5m deep) lake connected to the Danube by a narrow, natural canal, and bedecked by unique types of vegetation and unusual floating islands made of reeds. The nearby village of **Vetren**, situated in tranquil isolation right on the Danube, is a good spot for fishing, boating and even swimming. There are plenty of hikes and other outdoor activities to be enjoyed amidst all the lush river verdure, and both places remain peaceful, splendid sanctuaries for nature lovers. The large

(8000-hectare) area around the lake, known simply as the **Srebărna Nature Reserve**, has been a Unesco World Heritage site since 1983.

Lake Srebărna hosts over 160 species of water birds, including colonies of endangered small cormorants, Ferruginous ducks and Dalmatian pelicans. Dedicated bird lovers are titillated, too, at the sight of the beloved red-breasted goose and lesser white-fronted goose. There are elevated lookout posts set around the lake for bird-watching, accompanied by helpful boards detailing the names of birds, amphibians and mammals (such as the river otter) found locally. Amidst all the greenery, wild raspberries grow and apple and apricot trees blossom.

## Information

Neither Srebărna village nor Vetren have ATMs, though the former does have a doctor and post office (though, curiously, you can only mail letters to addresses within Bulgaria from it).

There's no real nightlife, except when the local Socialist Party Pensioners' Club tears it up at their periodic social activities. Their archrival, the Modern Club, offers dances and drinks for the (somewhat) younger set.

## Sights & Activities

**Bird-watching** accounts for most Srebărna visitors. Guided bird-watching tours and nature walks (40 lv per group) are conducted by Englishman Mike Black of the Pelican Lake Guesthouse (see right). Mike can supply mountain bikes for local **cycling**, as well as **fishing** gear rentals (10 lv) and, crucially, free temporary permits for fly-fishing on the Danube and Lake Srebărna. Mike even arranges **boating** trips (20 lv) in local fishing caiques on the Danube from Vetren.

For walkers, there's a relatively flat, 4km-long **ecotrail** that starts from the beginning of the village and runs along the lake.

The **Museum of Natural History** (☎ 086-823 894; admission 2 lv; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-4pm Mon-Fri) is in Srebărna village. It's not spectacular, but does contain a few exhibits about local bird life and flora of interest to nature lovers.

Though unknown to tourists, the hamlet of **Vetren** is a wonderfully peaceful (if overgrown) place right on the Danube where free camping is allowed. Here you can see fishermen hard at work, with their crates of flopping fish and colourful craft lined up on the shore.

**Swimming** is even possible, especially on the long exposed areas where the main road terminates. Facing the river, turn left and walk for about 200m (towards the camping area) to find a suitable swimming hole. Although signs prohibit it, locals do enjoy the occasional dip. Ask locals to advise where it's safe to swim to avoid being swept away by the currents.

An unusual **summer festival** punctuates the village's offbeat appeal. Each year on 24 August, a riotous celebration is held on the riverbank to celebrate the arrival of around 100 German and Austrian kayakers and canoeists, passing through on their mad, beer-fuelled quest to paddle the length of the Danube. In honour of their feat, the village sponsors music, dancing and copious food and drink, transforming the riverbank into a couple of days of camping and festivities.

At the time of writing, still unknown **Roman ruins** had just been discovered in Vetren; enquire locally if you're interested to know what is being unearthed.

## Sleeping & Eating

Srebărna village and Vetren now have several guesthouses, and some decent places to eat. Discreet camping, though technically illegal, is tolerated in the forests around Lake Srebărna. More organised free camping is on the riverbank in Vetren, on the grassy open area to the left of where the local fishing fleet pulls up its skiffs. There are basic toilets and showers, but no organised campground. A tiny canteen operates on the shore, serving soft drinks and snacks, as well as very fresh fish.

**Pelican Lake Guesthouse** (☎ 851 5322, 0885671058; www.srebarnabirding.com; Petko Simov 16; s/d/st/30/50/100 lv) Owned by hospitable English couple Mike and Jerry Black (see the boxed text, p276), the cosy Pelican Lake Guesthouse has two breezy adjoining rooms with a shared, but spotless modern bathroom. Alternatively, rent out both as a suite. Mike and Jerry provide a wealth of local knowledge and activities, and bird-watching tours are free for guests. There's a relaxing back garden patio, and a good collection of English-language novels and children's books. Guests can use the guesthouse's computer for checking email. The breakfast (3 lv extra) includes Jerry's delectable homemade strawberry jam.

**Hotel Pochuvin Dom Srebărna** (☎ 851 5462; lubabriz@ccpro.com; s/d incl breakfast 40/60 lv; 📍 🚰 🚽) If Pelican Lake is full, try the Pochuvin Dom,

### THANKS TO THE LAKE

After a Black Sea holiday in 2003, Englishman Mike Black and his wife Jerry took a liking to Bulgaria – so much so that they decided to move there two years later, to the placid shores of Lake Srebarna. Dedicated bird-watchers and nature lovers, the Blacks opened a small guesthouse, as several new British arrivals have done in recent years. However, unlike most, they took the trouble to study Bulgarian and learn the ways of the locals.

While there was much to like about life in the splendidly tranquil natural park, 'people weren't accustomed to picking up after themselves', recalls Mike. So, taking matters into their own hands and with the initial cooperation of a Japanese aid agency and the local authorities, the Blacks started a recycling initiative. Amazingly enough, they were even able to get local teenagers – usually the most unenthusiastic about such ventures – to join them in picking up the accumulated plastic bottles and bags that were creating a hazard for the lake's creatures and an eyesore for visitors.

Along the way, something strange happened: 'The locals started to see the value of keeping their lake clean,' says Jerry, 'and now the programme has really taken off.' The Blacks continue to get small sums from municipal authorities and, states Mike, 'sometimes even from guests, who will leave €50 in an envelope when they leave, with a note thanking us for keeping the lake clean.' For the Blacks, that has been the obvious thing to do for a special place that has given them an idyllic home, and so much unique wildlife to marvel over.

a five-room guesthouse run by the ebullient Luba Ivanova and her team of photogenic cats. Upper-storey rooms have handsome wood floors and great lake views, while lower rooms look out onto the garden and lawn. Big shared balconies stand on both levels, and the bathrooms are also shared. Guests can use the backyard *skara* (vented barbecue), and there's a wireless internet connection.

**Kalimaritsa** (☎ 0888234985; www.housekalimaritsa.bg; d/apt 40/60 lv) A Vetren restaurant that doubles as a guesthouse, the Kalimaritsa has six doubles and one modest apartment. The beautiful courtyard garden is bursting with grapevines and filled with traditional Bulgarian pots. The old-fashioned rooms are a bit musty, though passable. Dining is enjoyed around the courtyard and features many meats and whatever fish are in the catch of the day.

**Kafe Isvor** (☎ 0886432977; ul Dunav 14; mains 2-4 lv; ☎ 8am-11pm) Light lunches and drinks are served at this small café on the right-hand side of the road just after entering Srebarna village. Friendly local couple Incho and Krema run the adjacent provisions shop also.

**Restoran Diva** (☎ 0898751478; Dunav 19; mains 2-5 lv; ☎ 7am-1am) This fairly basic place in the centre has no architectural appeal, but does have the best food in Srebarna, from salads to grilled meats.

**Restaurant Stara Kushta** (☎ 0885200288; mains 3-6 lv; ☎ 6am-11pm, closed Mon) This traditional *me-*

*hana*, set in a handsome wood-framed house in Vetren that also provides accommodation, offers the best selection of Bulgarian dishes around. The traditional-style doubles (30 lv) have little flourishes such as colourful rugs and furnishings. It's signposted up a small dirt driveway heading towards the river. Phone ahead for either meals or rooms; the owners, the Leonova family, speak only Bulgarian.

**Kafe Leshnika** (☎ 851 5343; ul Liliya 1; ☎ 7am-11pm) This little café offers drinks; there's an outdoor bamboo enclosure and small interior.

### Getting There & Away

There is no bus station in either Srebarna village or Vetren. Buses traversing the main Silistra–Ruse route will leave you unceremoniously in a ditch on the side of the road, 1.5km from the centre of Srebarna village. Alternatively, local bus 22 from Silistra travels several times daily into Srebarna village.

To reach Vetren, enter Srebarna village and just keep following the main street, ul Dunavska. After 4km, you'll reach Vetren, which stops at the river.

### SILISTRA СИЛИСТРА

☎ 086 / pop 49,900

Little Silistra, with a bit of architecture and river views, is a low-key though intriguing town just east of Srebarna, and one of the few places on the Danube for enjoying boat trips.

While Silistra has some museums and a nice park, it has few services compared with Ruse.

### Orientation & Information

The bus station is 1.5km from the main square, pl Svoboda; around it are clustered banks, foreign exchange offices, the post office, telephone centre and the new **Silistra Tourist Agency** (☎ 820 487; wfa@abv.bg), which provides local information and accommodation advice.

### Sights & Activities

Silistra's prime position on the Danube has attracted a bewildering amount of invaders and occupants, from Thracians, Romans, Greeks, Bulgars, Russians, Romanians and Turks, all of whom built citadels and fortresses in or near the town. The **ruins** of the ancient Roman city of Durostorum, one of Silistra's previous incarnations, lie along the street between the mall and river.

The Turkish **Medzhitabiya Fortress** (built in 1848) is closed but the forested **park** surrounding it offers relaxed **hiking**. The fortress is 5km from town (5 lv by taxi) on the Silistra–Dobrich road, or a 3km uphill walk. The TV tower is an adjacent landmark.

The **Art Gallery** (☎ 826 838; bul Simeon Veliki 120; admission 0.50 lv, free Thu; ☎ 8am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) is in a renovated yellow building along the mall, opposite the drama theatre. The gallery contains hundreds of contemporary Bulgarian artworks, as well as Japanese engravings.

The **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 823 894; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9.30am-noon & 1-7.30pm Tue-Sat) occupies the same building as the Art Gallery, and houses artefacts from the Turkish fortress and other local sites. Costumes, jewellery and even a 3rd-century BC Thracian chariot are also displayed. The museum may move in the future, so double-check.

The MV **Bravo** offers one-hour **boat tours** (per person 5-6 lv) along the Danube several days a week. Enquire at the travel agency in the Zlatna Dobroudja Hotel.

### Sleeping & Eating

**Zlatna Dobroudja Hotel** (☎ 821 355; fax 821 361; ul Dobroudja 2; s 40-55, lv, d 66-99 lv; ☎) This central hotel has reasonable rates given the standard of accommodation.

**Hotel Drustar** (☎ 812 200; www.hoteldrustar.com; Kapitan Mamarchev 10; s/d/apt 140/170/230 lv) The rooms at this new four-star place have all the mod cons, and are individually deco-

rated and overlook the Danube. There's also a pool, and gourmet eats available at its restaurant. As if that weren't enough, the hotel also promises unimpeded impregnation for chronically childless couples. (Could we make this stuff up?)

Several cafés and restaurants are found in and around the hotel complex, including Pizzeria Zlatna Dobroudja, which offers tasty pizzas and pasta dishes from 5 lv.

### Getting There & Away

Hourly buses and minibuses leave the Silistra **bus station** (☎ 820 280) for the Yug bus station in Ruse (5.50 lv, two hours). From Silistra, two or three daily buses go to Varna, eight to Dobrich, four to Sofia, three to Shumen and one to Veliko Tarnovo. From the **train station** (☎ 821 802) one daily train goes to Ruse and three to Samuil.

From Silistra port to Călărăși (in Romania), a ferry operates every few hours (25/7 lv per car/passenger). Fares are payable in euros or leva. Public transport on the Romanian side is not reliable, however, so the border crossing at Ruse is probably easier.

### DOBRICH ДОБРИЧ

☎ 058 / pop 113,800

A popular day trip for Black Sea tourists, Dobrich is not overwhelming but does have a long history of arts and crafts production, which is kept alive today in the shops of its ethnological complex. The town is quite old, having been settled originally in the 15th century. Most recently, Dobrich has made a name for itself due to the excellent agricultural products grown on the surrounding plains.

### Information

The large central square, pl Svoboda, hosts the United Bulgarian Bank, the post office and telephone centre, plus restaurants and shops. For internet access, there's the **Top Gun internet café** (ul Nezavisimost; per hr 1 lv).

### Sights

#### STARIYAT DOBRICH ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUM COMPLEX

Some 37 shops, cafés, bars, restaurants and souvenir stalls co-inhabit this **complex** (☎ 29 068; ul Dr K Stoilov; admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm summer, 8.30am-6pm winter), set along cobblestone streets. You



can watch blacksmiths, potters, weavers and other artisans while they work, and sit out in the shady courtyard, lined with cafés. There's also a hotel (see right).

The complex is signposted at the southern entrance, behind a large modern construction. The **exhibition hall** (admission 1 lv) at the courtyard is best known for its antique jewellery. After watching the local artisans at work, feel free to shop, and so bring home some traditional Dobrich handicrafts.

### ART GALLERY

The **Art Gallery** (☎ 602 215; www.dobrichgallery.org; ul Bulgaria 14; admission 0.50 lv, guided tour in English or German 1 lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1.30-6pm Mon-Sat) houses more than 1700 artworks collected over a century, including many by the acknowledged master of modern Bulgarian painting, Vladimir Dimitrov.

### YORDAN YOYKOV LITERATURE MUSEUM

This **museum** (☎ 624 308; ul Gen Gurko 4; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) features furniture, costumes, knick-knacks, books and photos relating to Bulgarian novelist Yordan

Yovkov. There's an informative leaflet available in English.

### ETHNOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Inside the lovely courtyard of a Bulgarian National Revival-period home, this **museum** (ul 25 Septemvri; admission 2 lv; ☎ 8.30am-noon & 2-4.30pm Mon-Fri) exhibits traditional costumes and jewellery. It's adjacent to a park with a statue of Vasil Levski, in front of the **Church of Sveti Georgi** (admission free; ☎ 8am-6pm).

### Sleeping

**Stara Dobrich Inn** (☎ 601 5904; Stariyat Dobrich Ethnological Museum Complex; s/d 50/68 lv) Right inside the traditional shopping complex, this rustic guesthouse offers clean, modern rooms with traditional furnishings. It's not well signposted, however: from the main square, turn right by the Rosexim sign, then turn left and go through the archway by the Western Union building. Walk through the museum complex and finally turn left.

**Hotel Bulgaria** (☎/fax 625 444; pl Svoboda; s/d 70/100 lv; ☎) This massive central hotel has large and comfortable, though old-fashioned rooms, each with a fan, TV and

fridge. It's decent value and has a casino and fitness centre.

### Eating

Cafés line ul 25 Septemvri, in the shady park to the south. There are excellent *mehanas* at the ethnological complex.

**Seasons Bistro** (ul Bulgaria; mains 5-7 lv) Near the Hotel Bulgaria, this is a popular spot for Bulgarian and European dishes.

**Dublin Irish Pub** (☎ 601 475; ul 25 Septemvri 19; mains 5-8 lv; ☎ 9am-11pm) This dependable quasi-Irish place on the square serves tasty pub grub and plenty of good beer. It's popular with locals.

### Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 690 120), on Dobrich's eastern side, buses and minibuses leave for

Albena (4 lv, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes), Varna (4 lv, 40 minutes, every 15 minutes), Balchik (3.50 lv, 45 minutes, every 30 minutes) and Kavarna (4.50 lv, one hour). Two daily buses go to both Ruse (13 lv, three hours) and Silistra (6.50 lv, 1½ hours). All buses to Sofia (17 lv to 18 lv, seven to eight hours) leave from the Hotel Bulgaria car park, not from the bus station.

The **train station** (☎ 603 078), on the western edge of town, has regular trains westwards to Sofia (20.30 lv, 9½ hours) via Shumen (6.30 lv, three hours) and Gorna Oryakhovitsa (12 lv, six hours) for Veliko Tarnovo. Trains also go east to Varna (4.10 lv, two hours). You can get a train to Kardam on the Romanian border, but you can't cross here. The station's Rila Bureau sells international tickets.

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