

# Bulgaria БЪЛГАРИЯ

Hurry. Eastern Europe's last stop to the south, Bulgaria, is changing fast. Now part of the EU and with 'New Bulgarians' (aka middle-aged Brits) buying up beach and mountain villas, Bulgaria is having a change-forever moment. Its 'big four' – bustling modern capital Sofia, laid-back hill town Veliko Tărnovo, lively Black Sea city Varna, and cobbled Roman-rooted Plovdiv – dominate most itineraries. They're worthy, but it's worth digging deeper, where you'll find whitewashed gingerbread taverns to bunk in, old guys whispering baby goats to sleep on trains, locals bragging about 'hangover-free' wine and hikes to huts on Alp-like peaks with ski runs weaving down them. Bulgaria's reputation as a budget ski and beach destination is starting to wear out: its chief beach resort, Sunny Beach, has three times the hotel capacity than its beach can fit. Once a quiet ski base, Bansko is building itself up to make a case for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

All is far, far from lost though. DIY explorations through the culturally rich Stara Planina or Rodopi Mountains take in traditional villages – including some Turkish ones where Bulgarian phrases are met with confused shrugs. Strong links to Bulgaria's distant history are being uncovered with gusto, as just-discovered Thracian sites – particularly around Kazanlık – are opening to visitors. Up in Belogradchik, medieval walls surround animated bluffs so lifelike you wonder if Medusa had her way with a tea party of giants.

Many visitors use guides such as this one to 'check the Bulgaria box' with a couple of days in Sofia, then move on. It's kinda sad – but all the better for those capitalising on areas that see fewer folk.

## FAST FACTS

- **Area** 110,910 sq km
- **Capital** Sofia
- **Currency** leva (lv); A\$1 = 1.20; €1 = 1.96lv; ¥100 = 1.39; NZ\$1 = 1.07; UK£1 = 2.85lv; US\$1 = 1.64lv
- **Famous for** Black Sea beaches, monasteries, yogurt
- **Official Language** Bulgarian
- **Phrases** *zdrasti* (hello), *blagodarya* (thank you), *imati li?* (do you have?), *kolko struva?* (how much?), *oshte bira molya* (another beer please)
- **Population** 8 million
- **Telephone Codes** country code ☎ 359; international access code ☎ 00
- **Visa** no visa required for citizens of Australia, Canada, the EU, New Zealand, USA and several other nations; see p186 for details



## HIGHLIGHTS

- Look across a river gorge and up to the tsar-sized citadel that was once home to a royal court at hilly **Veliko Tarnovo** (p162).
- Visit the Black Sea's busiest hub, **Varna** (p170) where the museums, open-air discos and sailor caps would be worth visiting even without the sea.
- Don your hiking boots to explore the mountainous topography of beautiful **Rila and Pirin** (p147) and **Rodopi** (p151) ranges.
- Channel *The Lord of the Rings* in the animated peaks that surround **Belogradchik** (p182), a medieval fort in Bulgaria's northwest pinkie.
- Check out Roman theatres and revival-era taverns in **Plovdiv** (p151), Bulgaria's most relaxing city.

## ITINERARIES

- One week** Stop off at Veliko Tarnovo for a couple days, then bus to Plovdiv for Roman ruins or Varna for the disco nights on the beach. Finish with a wander around the centre in bustling Sofia.
- Two weeks** Start off in Sofia for a couple of days, then head south to Rila Monastery for a night, and spend another in Melnik for some of the country's best wine. Go, via Sofia, to Plovdiv for two days, and then travel east to Kazanlak for a peek in a Thracian tomb. Head to the beach – walk the cobbled core of Sozopol, then hit the beach bars at Varna. Finish with two or three days in Veliko Tarnovo.

### HOW MUCH?

- Night in Sofia hostel 20lv
- Sofia–Plovdiv bus ticket 10lv
- Museum admission 2lv to 10lv
- Varna city map 3lv
- Day rental car 30lv to 50lv

### LONELY PLANET INDEX

- Litre of petrol 1.60lv
- Litre of bottled water 0.60lv
- Kamenitza beer 0.80lv
- Souvenir T-shirt 3lv to 5lv
- Street snack – banitsa 0.50lv

## CLIMATE & WHEN TO GO

Bulgaria has a temperate climate with cold, damp winters and hot, dry summers. See Climate Charts (p911) for more. From mid-July to August, Bulgaria swarms with tourists, particularly at Black Sea resorts. For beaches in the hot sun, a better time is September – the off-season is too quiet as almost everything's closed from October to March. The ski slopes fill from mid-December to March or mid-April, while much of the country's attractions trim their hours.

If you're not beach-bumming or skiing, spring or autumn are great times (particularly May) as there are very few tourists, and theatres and other cultural venues awake from hibernation.

## HISTORY

### Becoming Bulgaria

Thracians moved into the area in the 4th millennium BC, and by AD 100 Romans controlled the lands. The first Slavs migrated here from the north in the 5th century, and the First Bulgarian State was formed in 681.

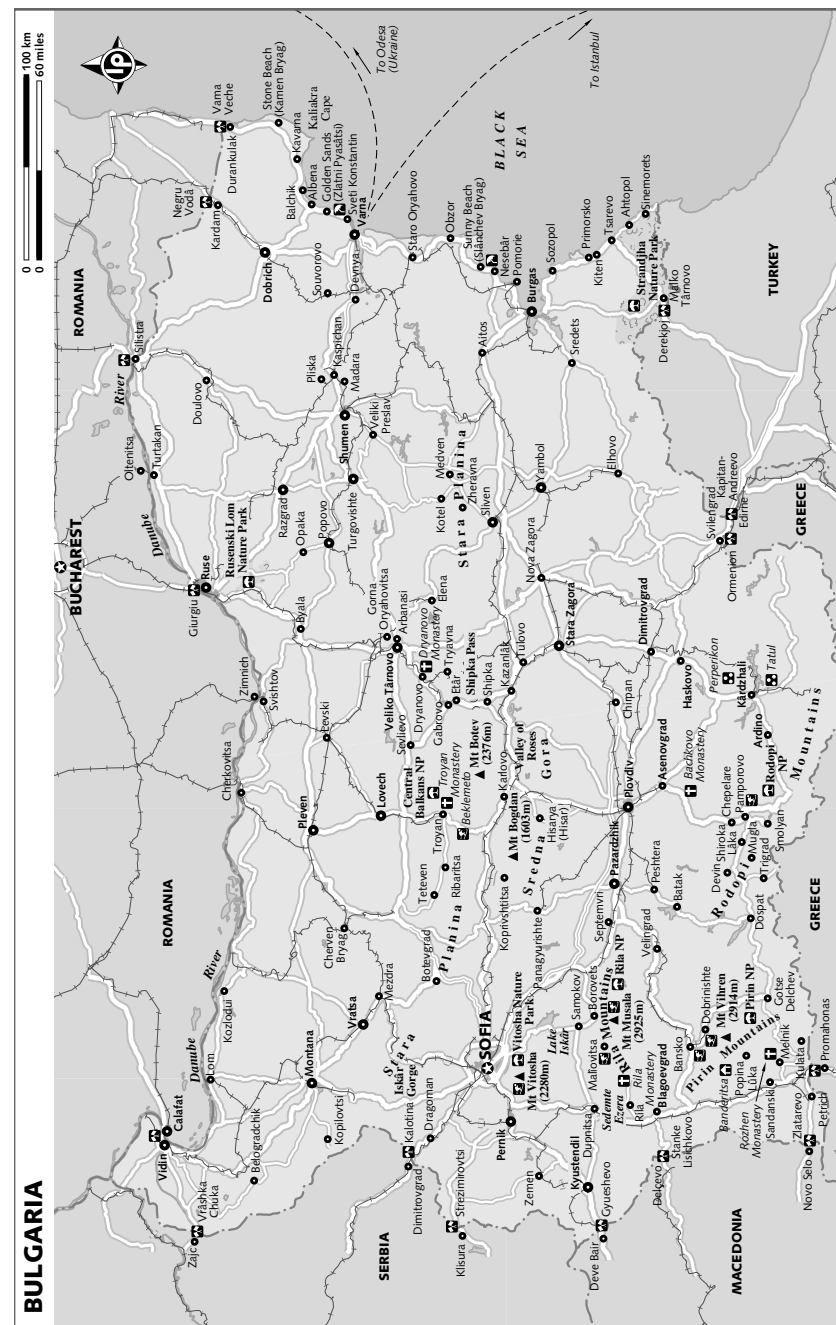
The fierce Turkic Bulgars – whose name later became Bulgaria – first reached these areas from their expansive territories between the Caspian and Black Seas. By the time the Byzantine Empire conquered Bulgaria in 1014 (after blinding 15,000 Bulgarian troops in one bloody poke-fest), the first state had created a language, the Cyrillic alphabet, a church and – spurred on by enforced conversion to Christianity – a people (a mix of Slavs, Proto-Bulgarians and a few Thracians).

Bulgaria's second kingdom, based in Veliko Tarnovo, began in 1185 and saw much warfare with Serbs, Hungarians and the Ottoman army, who took control in 1396.

### Life with the Ottomans

The next 500 years were spent living 'under the yoke' of Ottoman rule. The Orthodox church persevered by quietly holing up in monasteries. Higher taxes for Christians saw many convert to Islam.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, many butt-kicking 'awakeners' are credited with re-viving Bulgarian culture. By the 1860s several revolutionaries (including Georgi Rakovski, Vasil Levski and Hristo Botev) organised *cheti* (rebels) bands for the (failed) April Uprising of 1870. With Russia stepping in, the



## BOGOMILS

These cuddly celibate vegetarian hermits of the 10th century AD fought growing corruption in the church by rejecting *anything* visual as dripping in the most satanic of evils. Naturally, they quickly became revered heroes of their day, called the 'Holy Ones'. Some argue their hermitic complacency didn't stimulate a much-needed intellectual awakening, and Bogomils slowly died off in all but street names around the country. *Vivos los Bogomilos!*

Ottoman army was defeated in 1878, and Bulgaria became independent again.

## Nazis & Soviets

With eyes on lost Macedonia, and following a series of painful Balkan wars (including WWI), Bulgaria surprisingly aligned with Nazi Germany in WWII – Germany only just won out over the USSR for Bulgaria's allegiance – with hopes to expand its borders. Famously, Tsar Boris III said 'no' to Hitler, refusing to send Bulgaria's Jewish population to concentration camps, sparing up to 50,000 lives.

As the war drew to a close, Bulgaria did a final flip-flop over to the Soviet side, but that did little to smooth relations with the West or the USSR following WWII. Bulgaria embraced communism wholeheartedly (even proposing in 1973 to join the Soviet republics).

## Modern Bulgaria

After making friends with the USA (there are US military bases outside Burgas), NATO saying 'yep' to Bulgaria in 2004 and the EU in 2007, Bulgarians are a little more upbeat these days. However, considering average monthly salaries linger around €165, one local joke is more pessimistic: 'We were little brother to the Ottoman Empire for 500 years; they collapsed. Then the Nazis and Soviets, and they collapsed. NATO, USA and EU, watch out!'

Real estate has become a giant money-making revenue for locals, as property values have generally shot up by 200% in the past few years. Run-down homes and new beach-front condos start at €15,000 and climb past €50,000.

Sofia and Bansko together are making a pitch for the 2014 Winter Olympics, so the construction business is likely to boom, too.

## PEOPLE

The population of Bulgaria is 7.45 million (slightly shrinking recently), with Bulgarians and Slavs constituting 83.5%. The largest minorities are Turks (9.5%) and Roma (4.6%); there are also smaller populations of Russians, Jews and Greeks.

A few famous Bulgarians include Christo, an environmental artist famous for putting up the orange gates in New York's Central Park in 2005; and Hristo Stoichkov, the country's favourite footballer, who won the Golden Boot in the 1994 World Cup.

## RELIGION

During the communist era Bulgaria was officially atheist. These days, about 84% of the population are Orthodox and 12% are Muslim (almost all are Sunni).

## ARTS

### Architecture

Bulgaria's 19th-century revival saw many town makeovers with quaint, traditionally styled *káshta* buildings (with whitewashed walls, wood shutters, wood-carved ceilings and hand-woven carpets) built close alongside (sometimes over) cobbled streets. This massive source of Bulgarian pride is evident in many towns, such as Koprivshitsa (p159) and Plovdiv's Old Town (p153).

### Visual Arts

Bulgaria's most treasured art is on the walls of medieval monasteries and churches, such as Boyana Church near Sofia (p147), Arbanasi's Nativity Church (p166) and the paintings by Zahari Zograf (1810–53) at Rila Monastery (p148).

### Music

The currently popular and controversial 'wedding music', aka *chalga*, is a vaguely Indian-sounding synth-pop (picked up from Turkey

### 'YES OR NO?'

Bulgarians shake their head 'yes' and nod their head 'no'. It's confusing at first, then fun. Just try to think that a shake is sweeping the floor clean ('yes, come in') and a nod is a slamming shut a garage door ('no, go away fool!'). If in doubt, ask '*da ili ne?*' (yes or no?).

## YOU'VE NOT BEEN TO BULGARIA UNTIL YOU...

There are just some things you have to do to really *be* in Bulgaria:

- Try *banitsa* (cheese-filled pastry), *boza* (ill-tasting fermented soft drink) and *rakiya* (brandy).
- Visit a 19th-century revival-era *káshta* house; Plovdiv and Koprivshitsa have heaps.
- Learn Cyrillic: it was made here (not Russia, dammit) and takes an hour and a beer to figure out.
- Fill a bottle with mineral water; springs are everywhere and it's a ritual for many Bulgarians.
- Do the 'yes' horizontal head shake.
- Put some ketchup on that pizza slice, amigo!
- Listen to the sexually ambiguous pop of Azis (opposite) and deny liking it.

and Serbia) with less-than-intellectual lyrics. (One sample: 'We win, we lose...either way we get drunk, we're Bulgarians!') Essentially no-one in the country admits to liking Azis, a seriously flamboyant, sexually ambiguous *chalga* performer, who sells more CDs than nearly any Bulgarian artist.

Traditional music – played with *gaida* (bagpipes), *tambura* (four-stringed lute) and *tápan* (drum) – is widespread. Turn on a TV and you'll see it on several channels nightly. Schools in Plovdiv (p154), Shiroka Laka (p158) and Kotel (p162) stage recitals and offer classes.

## ENVIRONMENT

### The Land

Bulgaria lies in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, stretching 502km from the Serbian border to the Black Sea.

Bulgaria is one-third mountains. The Stara Planina (also known as the Balkan Mountains) stretch across central Bulgaria. In the southwest are three higher ranges: the Rila Mountains, south of Sofia (home to the country's highest point, Mt Musala, 2925m); the Pirin Mountains, just to the south, which reach Greece; and the Rodopi Mountains to the east.

### Wildlife

Although Bulgaria has some 56,000 kinds of living creature – including one of Europe's largest bear populations – most visitors see little wildlife, unless venturing deep into the thickets and mountains.

### National Parks

Bulgaria has four national parks (Rila, Pirin, Rodopi and Central Balkans) and 10 nature parks, all of which offer some protection to the environment (and tourist potential).

## FOOD & DRINK Staples & Specialities

There are two kinds of Bulgarian food: Bulgarian food and pizza. The former comprises many light dishes, with Turkish or Greek influences. Salads – such as the everywhere-you-look *shopska* (tomatoes, onions, cucumbers and cheese) – start most meals. Main dishes are mostly grilled beef, pork, lamb and chicken – such as the *kebabche* (spicy meat sausages) – or heavier stews such as *kavarma*. Side dishes (such as boiled potatoes or cheese-covered chips) are ordered separately.

Vegetarians are not at a loss. Aside from salads, most restaurants have yogurt- or vegetable-based soups and several egg dishes. Well-made pizza, served by slice or whole, is everywhere.

Breakfast for most Bulgarians is espresso, cigarettes (plural intended) and a hot cheese-filled *banitsa* pastry, available at small bakeries (often named *zakuska*, 'breakfast').

Wine is super in Bulgaria, particularly Melnik's red. Says one local: 'Our wine is as good as France's, and their worst is worse than our worst.'

### SHOPSKA'S A FAKE!

Horrors! Bulgaria's famous, tasty *shopska*, the 'traditional' meal starter that woos even hardened hearts across this fine land, is something of the 'Spice Girls of salads'. Its nomenclature is actually a 1970s, Balkan-tourist creation – something to help tourists stomach something distinctly *Bulgarian*. It spread like rabbits with locals though; hardly a meal here gets started without it.

## Where to Eat & Drink

Evocative Bulgarian *krásh̄ta* restaurants, it must be said, don't differ from one another much. A 10% tip is expected at sit-down restaurants, though sometimes it's included with the *smetka* (bill).

Cafés also act as de facto bars, serving local beer, wine and brandies. Many towns you'll come across have more standard beer houses (*birarias*).

## SOFIA СОФИЯ

☎ 02 / pop 1.11 million

OK, in comparison with Eastern European capitals to the north, Sofia is something of a Novosibirsk, an urban mass without any serious standout attractions, or even a clear central square or street. But that's just the first impression – and it's not at all fair. The whole Bulgarian world twirls around Sofia, and its shady gold-brick streets and parks give it energy and confidence that lures some travellers into its artier nooks for (on occasion) weeks. Also, Sofia has a huge mountain in Mt Vitosh̄a, about 10km south, with skiing and hiking options waiting all year.

## HISTORY

Settled perhaps 7000 years ago by a Thracian tribe (eying the area's springs), and later named Serdica by Romans, Sofia is – despite the years – young. It was an outpost of 1200 residents when it became the nation's unlikely fourth capital in 1879 for its geographical location (ie proximity to ever-sought Macedonia). In the decades thereafter, much planned or aesthetic development was curbed by war and communism.

### SOFIA IN TWO DAYS

Walk! Start at the **Aleksander Nevski Church** (p140) and nearby souvenir stands, and make 'Ministry of Silly Walks' jokes at the **changing of the guards** (p141). Wander south on side streets – lunch at **Divaka** (p144) – and make your way to **NDK** (p142) for deck views. Head back along bul Vitosh̄a to **Sveta Nedelya Cathedral** (p142) to fill up your bottle at the **spring wells** (p142) and wander the **Ladies Market** (p145). A second day is well spent hiking or skiing at **Vitosh̄a** (p147).

The name (changed from Serdica in the 15th century) comes from the Greek word for wisdom, not from an Italian.

## ORIENTATION

Sofia's main bus and train station are across bul Maria Luisa from each other, about 500m north of the start of the centre. Thoroughfares bul Maria Luisa and Vitosh̄a meet at pl Sveta Nedelya, which is crossed by ul Tsar Osvoboditel, which leads past government buildings. City maps with transport routes are widely available.

## INFORMATION

For directory assistance call ☎ 144, or check <http://db.infotel.bg:8889> for an online Bulgarian-language Sofia directory.

## Bookshops

**Book market** (pl Slaveikov) This daily open-air market sells some English secondhand novels and is open during daylight hours.

**Dom na Knigata** (☎ 981 7897; ul Graf Ignatiev, pasazh No 1; ☎ 10am-7pm) Book nuts' best haven in Bulgaria is found on ul Graf Ignatiev, across from pl Slaveikov. Messy racks of paperbacks in English, French, German, Spanish and Italian.

## Emergency

For police matters between 8am and 6pm, you (allegedly) can reach an English-speaking operator at ☎ 988 5239, or a French-speaking one at ☎ 982 3028. Otherwise, call ☎ 166. Presently you call ☎ 150 for an ambulance and ☎ 160 for the fire department.

## Internet Access

**BTC** (ul General Gurko; per hr 2lv; ☎ 8am-8pm) Eleven internet computers. Likely to be open 24 hours in future.

**Garibaldi** (ul Graf Ignatiev; per hr 2lv; ☎ 24hr)

**Site** (bul Vitosh̄a 45; per hr 2lv; ☎ 24hr) Also makes international calls for 0.22lv per minute.

## Laundry

It's a problem, here and throughout Bulgaria. Hostels can help, otherwise you may have to wash it yourself.

## Left Luggage

**Central Bus Station** (per bag per day 5lv; ☎ 8am-midnight)

**Train Station** (per bag per day 2lv; ☎ 6am-11pm) At the south end of the main floor; electronic lockers (2lv per day) are in the basement.

## STS KIRIL & METODII

The two brothers Kiril (Cyril) and Metodii (Methodius) were born in Thessaloniki in the early 9th century to a noble Byzantine family of Slavic-Bulgarian origins. Both were scholars and monks who studied and worked throughout the Balkans.

They are revered in Bulgaria for developing in 863 the first Bulgarian alphabet, called Glagolic, which was later simplified by one of their disciples, Clement, and became known as the Cyrillic alphabet. But, more importantly, they helped spread Orthodox Christianity throughout the Balkans by promoting the use of Slavic as the fourth accepted language of the Church (after Latin, Greek and Hebrew).

The Cyrillic alphabet is now used in Bulgaria, Russia, Macedonia, Ukraine, Belarus, Serbia and Mongolia. Bulgarians even celebrate Cyrillic Alphabet Day (also known as the Day of Bulgarian Culture) on 24 May.

## Media

*Sofia Echo* is an English-language paper, with entertainment listings, that comes out Friday (2.40lv). A few freebie publications list restaurants and bars: the quarterly *Sofia Inside & Out*, the monthly *Sofia City* ([www.sofiacityguide.com](http://www.sofiacityguide.com)) and the weekly *Programata* (in Bulgarian only; its website [www.programata.bg](http://www.programata.bg) has an English version).

## Medical Services

**Poliklinika Torax** (☎ 988 5259, 980 5791; bul Stamboliyski 57; ☎ 24hr) Good private clinic with English-language doctors west of the centre.

**Pirogov Hospital** (☎ 915 4111; bul General Totleben 21; ☎ 24hr) English is a crap-shoot.

## Money

Most foreign-exchange booths along bul Vitosh̄a, bul Maria Luisa and bul Stamboliyski run nonstop.

**Bulbank** (ul Lavele & ul Todor Alexandrov; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) Changes travellers cheques for 0.2% commission (minimum €1). There's an additional €0.50 charge for euro cheques, and €0.25 charge for British-pound cheques. You may need to show your cheque receipts.

**Central Cooperative Bank** (ul Dondukov 7B; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Mon-Fri) Charges 0.75% fee on travellers cheques (minimum €3).

## Telephone

**BTC** (ul General Gurko; ☎ 24hr) Snazzy phone booths. It's 0.36lv per minute for international calls, 0.72lv if calling a mobile phone. Domestic long-distance calls are 0.25lv for the first minute, then 0.18lv per minute.

## Tourist Information

**National Tourism Information & Advertising Centre** (☎ 987 9778; [www.bulgariatravel.org](http://www.bulgariatravel.org); ul Sveta

Sofia; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri) Has national brochures. English-speaking staff are nice, but have little information to share.

## Travel Agencies

**EBP Tours** (☎ 0888 922 916; Traffic Market, office 61; ☎ 6.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 6.30am-2pm Sat & Sun) Bus station agent books tickets and helps with accommodation (€10 per person); they also have an office in the train station basement.

**Usit Colours** (☎ 937 3175; ul Vasil Levski 35; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Sells ISIC cards (10lv) and offers discounted air fares for students.

**Zig Zag** (☎ 980 5102; [www.zigzagbg.com](http://www.zigzagbg.com); bul Stamboliyski 20V; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, daily in summer) Super-helpful English-language staff charge a 5lv consultation fee to book rooms, and give advice on hikes and activities around the country. Check its website for organised tours (hiking, kayaking and horse riding) that individuals can join. Zig Zag works with Odysseya-In, a national agency. Enter from ul Lavele.

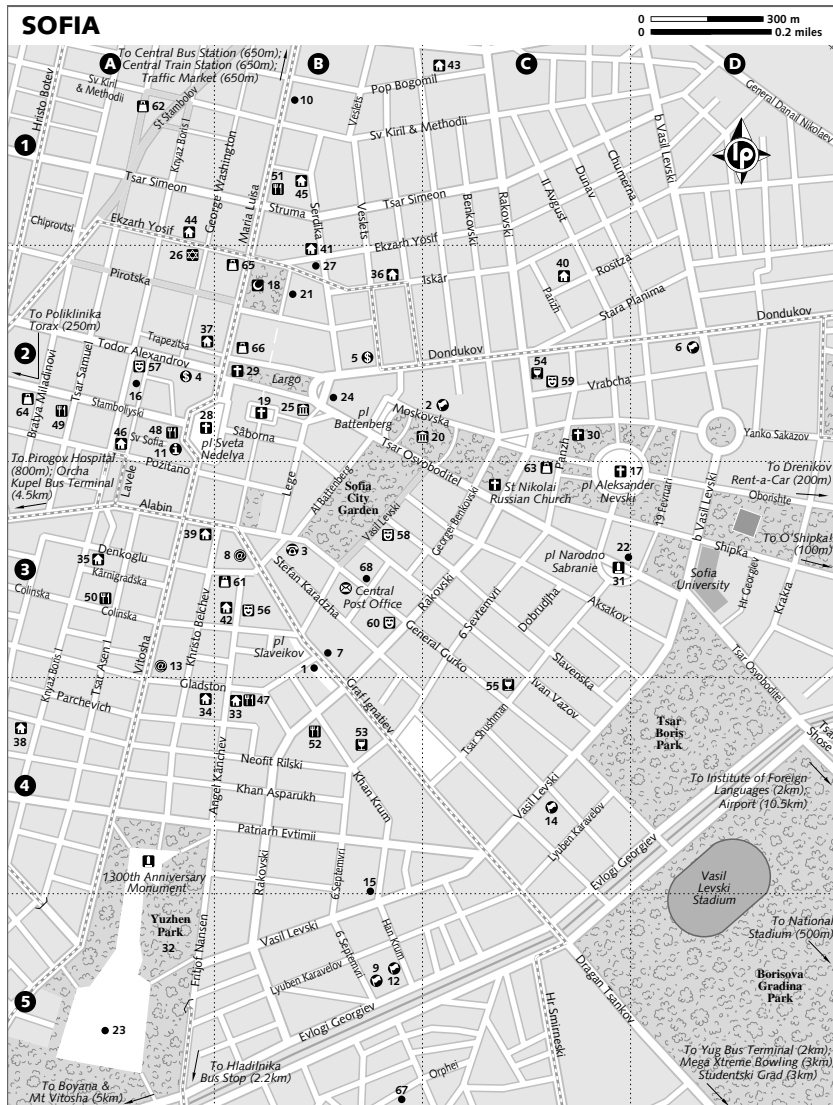
## Visas

**Immigration Office** (☎ 982 3316; bul Maria Luisa 48; ☎ foreigner services 1am-noon Mon-Thu) This hectic office (in an unmarked entrance of the 'MBP' building) can extend visas.

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Pickpockets (including some well-dressed mum-and-kid teams) sometimes troll bul Vitosh̄a, particularly around Sveta Nedelya Cathedral, as well as outside the train station. Note that if you are carrying a big backpack or bulky luggage on public transport you will need to punch an extra ticket for it (some travellers have been fined about 5lv from officials).

Cab drivers often con travellers by charging exorbitant amounts.



**SIGHTS**

See Sofia at its best by roaming its atmospheric streets, particularly the tight lanes between ul Graf Ignatiev and bul Vitoshka north of the NDK, Borisova Gradina Park (with its giant monuments and leafy grounds) and Studentski Grad. Also see the Around Sofia section (p147).

**Around Ploshad Aleksander Nevski**

Gold-domed and massive, Sofia's premier focal point is the deliberately Russian-style **Aleksander Nevski Church** (pl Aleksander Nevski; admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm), constructed between 1892 and 1912. It's named after a Swedish-born Russian warrior in honour of the Russian liberators (including the 200,000 who died

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fighting the Ottomans). Inside the church are giant brass chandeliers hanging from the smoky ceilings high above. This and the Russian **Tsar Osvooboditel statue**, two blocks south, sandwich the Bulgarian **National Assembly**, something that gets some Bulgarians to eyeroll over.

On the church's northwestern corner, a door leads down to the **Aleksander Nevski Crypt** (☎ 981 5775; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 10.30am-6.30pm Tue-Sun). It's a wide, well-lit space containing many national icons stretching back to the 5th century.

To the west (with an eternal flame burning outside), **Sveta Sofia Church** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm summer, 7am-6pm winter) dates from the 5th century and inspired the name of the city. You can see earthquake-battered mosaics under the stone floor.

**STYLIN' COPS**

Watch for Porsche, Mercedes and Audi convertible 'police cars'. Sofia's home to a handful of luxury cars that have been 'confiscated' (for whatever reasons) and converted into the world's most slick police fleet.

**Around Sofia City Garden**

This fountain-filled park a couple of blocks southwest of pl Aleksander Nevski is lined with cafés in good weather and surrounded by a gold-brick road.

To the north is the former Royal Palace, now home to two museums. The better of the two is the **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 988 1974; ul Tsar Osvooboditel; adult 3lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Nov, 10am-4pm Tue-Sun Dec-Mar). It's palatial, but its dozen rooms (with lots of English signs) give a greater regional context to the whys and whats of traditional Bulgarian costumes and customs than you'll find in most such museums in the country.

Also in the palace, the **National Art Gallery** (☎ 980 0093; ul Tsar Osvooboditel; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun, 10am-7.30pm Thu) is a squeaky-floored 10-hall museum, with often changing exhibits dedicated to Bulgarian art.

Across from the giant white **Party House** (closed to the public) is the **President's Building** (also closed to the public), the site of the **changing of the guards**, where three feather-capped guys ceremoniously slap boot soles on the pavement (on the hour during daylight hours).

BULGARIA

BULGARIA

The walkway the soldiers come from leads to the courtyard home of the small red-brick **Church of St George**, which dates from the 3rd century. It was much damaged in WWII, but you can see fragments of murals inside that date from the 12th century.

### Around Ploshad Sveta Nedelya

In the heart of pl Sveta Nedelya (a big block west of the President's Building) is well-lit, ornate **Sveta Nedelya Cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm), built between 1856 and 1863. Colourful murals line the inside top of the dome (if you can see through the candle smoke). Communists bombed the church in 1925 to kill Tsar Boris III, but failed.

Just north, accessed via an underpass, the **Sveta Petka Samardjiska Church** (adult 2lv; ☎ 8am-7pm) is a small church that pokes up its 14th-century steeple from the underpass amid a sea of traffic.

North on bul Maria Luisa are the ornate red-and-gold **mineral baths** (aka Turkish Baths), which have long been closed but at research time were, supposedly, due to reopen as a 'city museum' and 'spa'. If not, you can get an idea of its interiors from the renovated Tsentralni Khali (a mall across the street, which dates from 1909), or see mineral water in action just across ul Ekzarh Yosi, where locals fill bottles from modern **spring wells**.

Nearby is the unmistakable 16th-century **Banya Bashi Mosque** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk).

A block west is the **Sofia Synagogue** (ul Ekzarh Yosif 16; ☎ approx 10am-3.30pm Mon-Sat, closed to public during prayers), the largest Sephardic synagogue in Europe.

To the south, ritzy bul Vitoshka faces its far-off namesake, Mt Vitoshka. South of pl Sveta Nedelya 1km is **Yuzhen Park**, home to a falling-apart monument and the gigantic 'viva-1981!' **NDK** (Palace of Culture) complex, with cafés, shops, cinema and some events. On most days, its viewing deck is open.

### Studentski Grad

A few kilometres closer to Mt Vitoshka (south of the centre), Student Town is an enclave of college students living in a spread-out neighbourhood of drab communist-era apartments booming with life at all hours (except the summer break). One resident said: 'Nightlife leads to day life. We party all the time'.

The Grad is home to an ever-changing selection of busy new cafés and bars at the

base of the housing blocks – a fascinating mix. Bowl big and beyond limits at **Mega Xtreme Bowling** (☎ 969 2600; ul Stefanov; per game 5lv; ☎ 10am-4am), about 500m north of the minibus terminus. There's also a pool, a bar (beer from 1.2lv, cocktails 2lv to 3lv) and captive audiences for rock shows at 11pm Saturday (and other times).

Take minibus 7 from bul Maria Luisa or minibus 8 along ul Rakovski (1.5lv one way). City bus 94 comes here from ul Tsarigradsko Shose, across from Sofia University. From the last stop, walk back toward the centre to find the bulk of activity.

### COURSES

The **Institute of Foreign Languages** (☎ 710 069; www.deo.uni-sofia.bg; ul Kosta Louchev 27) offers Bulgarian-language courses (the three-week class costs €220) as well as song and dance classes.

### SLEEPING Budget

Many hostels will offer pick-up service from the bus or train station if you reserve ahead. Prices drop by a couple of euro off-season.

**Sofia Hostel** (☎ 989 8582; www.hostels Sofia.com; ul Pozitano 16; dm incl breakfast €10) Bulgaria's first hostel has family decorations giving the small place a kindergarten feel (in a good way). Staff speak English. Two dorm rooms sleep 16 and have themes – the 'traditional' one has witches on the 'stone' wallpapered walls; the 'gallery' has reprints of Bulgarian masterpieces (and a balcony with mountain views). There's a kitchen (with laundry) and free internet. Only one bathroom though.

**Hostel Mostel** (☎ 0889-223 296; www.hostelmotel.com; ul Denkogu 2; dm/s/d incl breakfast €10/25/30; ☎) Lovingly run by a Bulgarian couple, who speak English and give rides back from the train station, the Mostel was in the process of moving to a new, bigger location at research time. The new spot, just off bul Maria Luisa, occupies two floors, with balconies and views of Banya Bashi Mosque and Mt Vitoshka; again it's more spacious than other hostels – with a giant sitting area planned. Staff are superb, gush with information and strive to keep things quiet after 11pm. There's a full kitchen to use and laundry service.

**Art Hostel** (☎ 987 0545; www.art-hostel.com; ul Angel Kanchev 21a; dm incl breakfast €10) This laid-back, nook-and-cranny hostel gets its subtitle, which is 'Usually we spend our time in the

garden', for its leafy courtyard out back. Past guests have helped transform small spaces – such as the wee kitchen and cool hang-out area inside – into a cosy scene where travellers mix with arty locals, who sometimes stage exhibitions. Things keep going late.

**Sofia Backpacker's Inn** (☎ 983 1672; www.sofiabackpackersinn.dir.bg; ul Struma 6; dm/r incl breakfast 18/48lv; ☎) Down an alley from busy ul Maria Luisa, this three-room, Japanese-owned inn has two pretty bare dorm rooms and lone double. The TV room has TV and VHS player, a guitar, and free internet.

Other hostel choices:

**Kervan Hostel** (☎ 983 9428; www.kervanhostel.com; ul Rositza 3; dm incl breakfast €10) Homely and quite clean – it feels a bit like a B&B – Kervan's a bit removed. It has antique radios, a small 'Spanish' tiled kitchen and bikes to rent.

**Internet Hostel** (☎ 989 9419; interhostel@yahoo.co.uk; 2nd fl, ul Alabin 50; dm €8-10; ☎) Small hostel with four rooms, an windowless cramped sitting area and lone shared bathroom.

**Oriental Express** (ul Khristo Belchev 8A) In the planning at time of research; owned by the Red Star crowd.

**Red Star Hostel** (☎ 986 3341; 3rd fl, ul Angel Kanchev; dm incl breakfast €8-10, s €18-20, d €24-28; ☎) Internet's nicer cousin, the Red Star again packs in the beds – the computer is in the dorm room – but has a nicer setting.

### Midrange

New hotels pop up frequently in Sofia. We've focused on nonchains, all within walking distance of the main sights around town.

Homestays are also an option to consider. Run by friendly ladies (who speak a bit of English and chain-smoke in front of a wall-sized map of Sofia), **Markela Accommodation Agency** (☎ 980 4925; markela@mail.bg; room 103, ul Ekzarh Yosif 35; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun) can hook you up with private, clean single rooms for 26lv to 33lv or doubles for 34lv to 40lv. Full apartments start at 45lv. It has a photo book to see what you're getting. Art Hostel (opposite) rents nice, private apartments in great locations (from €45 for a double). There's also an accommodation agency on the train station's ground floor that seems never to be open, and EBP Tours (p139) can find rooms near the station.

**Hotel Maya** (☎ 980 2796; ul Trapezitsa 4; s/d 30/40lv) Clean and homy, this central guesthouse has 12 rooms on either side of a rooftop courtyard overlooking TsUM shopping centre. Unfortunately all but one of the tiny private bathrooms are down the hall. No English is

spoken and most furnishings predate communism's fall.

**Rooms** (☎ 983 3508; the roomshostel@yahoo.com; ul Pop Bogomil 10; r 40lv) A purple-and-gold house on a grey street, the six-room guesthouse offers tidy but tiny themed rooms. A few antique pieces – an old bedside stand, a painted headboard – add some flair. No TVs. Singles are sometimes available for 20lv.

**Hotel Iskâr** (☎ 986 6750; ul Iskâr 11; r 40-53lv; ☎) For a simple but welcoming midrange deal, the Iskâr's 11 rooms are tough to beat. They're a bit small, and a few have private bathrooms across the hall, but views overlook a small patch of trees. Most staff light up for chats in English. Breakfast is 4lv in the small café downstairs.

**Scotty's Boutique** (☎ 983 6777; www.geocities.com/scottysboutiquehotel; ul Ekzarh Iossif 11; s €45, d €55-85; ☎ ☎) In a former Jewish apartment, across from the Sofia Synagogue, this splash of modernity is a welcome site for those looking for a break from grubby communist leftovers, or tackier 'modern' hotels. Each of the 16 terrific rooms are named for cities – 'Paris' is particularly bright and welcoming – and have TV, internet access, original wooden floorboards and low mattress frames. Scotty's is gay friendly, and staff often wears all-black outfits with Adidas shoes. Yes, it's hip.

**Hotel Niky** (☎ 952 3058; www.hotel-niky.com; ul Neofit Rilski 16; s/d incl breakfast from €30/35; ☎ ☎) It's chiefly about business travellers, but an English-speaking staff keeps it cheerful. The 22 rooms aren't huge but are super clean, with a hint of the modern (blue carpet, headboards running along the wall and coffee makers). Room 203 has a big balcony. The back restaurant's great.

### Top End

**Art O'tel** (☎ 980 6000; www.artotel.biz; ul Gladston 44; r incl breakfast €95-100; ☎ ☎) This side-street boutique – owned by the Barcelona football team owner! – is a flashy spot, from the lobby's marble-pillar fireplace and sunken dining room looking over a garden area to 22 colour-themed rooms (some with balconies). Prices drop by €15 or €20 at weekends.

### EATING

Sofia has the country's most dynamic and stylin' dining. Appealing new places are popping up constantly – try between bul Vitoshka and ul Rakovski.

## Bulgarian

**Trops Káshta** (ul Maria Luisa 26; salads 1lv, mains 1.50-3lv; ☎ 8am-8.30pm) For cheap, fast, point-and-eat cafeteria-style food, Trops is your new comrade. It's half price after 8pm.

**Happy Bar & Grill** (pl Sveta Nedelya; grills 1-7lv; ☎ 24hr) This chain institution is Bulgaria's 'American grill', something like a Hard Rock Cafe (guitars, trombones and BB King photos line the walls) with a crew of miniskirted waitresses serving rather un-American fare. The photo menu helps. Breakfast is served from 8am to 11am.

**Krächme Sam Doidokh** (I Came Alone; ul Tsar Samuel 73; dishes 1.50-3lv; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Sat) Like a timeless social club of sorts; you'll feel like you're in a *National Geographic* article from 1976. Old-timers often pluck on guitars and eat traditional goodies (rabbit, pigs legs, fish, pickled onion) and drink... a lot. A sign reads 'full sobriety leads to instant death' (in Bulgarian). Not for everyone.

**Divaka** (☎ 989 9543; ul Gladston 54; grills 1.20-10lv, mains 1.90-10lv; ☎ 24hr) This sprawling, modern four-room restaurant fills daily with happy Bulgarians chomping on low-cost traditional fare – grilled meats, fish fillets and cheese-covered chips. The chicken *divashki* is smothered in dill, garlic and lemon (3.60lv). Several vegetarian options.

**Pri Yafata** (☎ 980 1727; ul Colinska 28; mains 5-12.50lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) An excellent introduction to Bulgarian cuisine (and traditional costumes), this chain restaurant (forgivably trite) packs in locals and tourists for its grilled meats (chicken *mehanzhuki* is a tasty pork and mushroom-filled fillet for 6.90lv). Plenty of vegetarian options.

## Fast Food & Self-Catering

**Familiya Supermarket** (bul Maria Luisa; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm) On north side of TsUM shopping centre.

**Tsentrlni Khali** (cnr bul Maria Luisa & ul Ekzarh Yosif; ☎ 7am-midnight) This refurbished covered market dates from 1909 and has three floors busy with locals seeking fresh produce, sausage, Swiss chocolate, beer, ice cream and cheap meals for 2lv or 3lv.

## Pizza

**O'Shipka!** (☎ 944 1288; ul Shipka 11; pizza 2-6.70lv; ☎ 24hr) This lively three-storey restaurant-bar fills with students. The pizzas are tasty, and there's live music most nights

in the cavernous basement bar (often 3lv to get in). The cramped upstairs room is nonsmoking.

**Ugo** (ul Khan Krum 2; pizza 2-7lv; ☎ 24hr) Twenty-something couples date and meet up at this slick, modern chain. It's location is great, with soft hanging lights and seats looking out on a quiet side street. If you're pizza'd out (this is Bulgaria after all), there's couscous (4.90lv) and plenty of pasta dishes.

## Vegetarian

**Dream House** (ul Alabin 50A; mains 2.10-3.70lv; ☎ 11am-10pm) Sofia's seen a welcome splash of vegetarian eateries in recent years, but we still go for Dream for meatless dining. This cool-mint restaurant, upstairs from the tram lines, fills its tables for most meals. Loads of inspired options (including Thai noodle dishes and 18 vegan choices!), plus a Sunday buffet from noon to 7pm for 5lv.

## DRINKING

Look for *Programata's* free annual *Club Guide* for listings in English. Studentski Grad has many good bars, too.

**Poison's** (ul Tsar Shushman 22; ☎ 10am-2am) This place has a nice, leafy outdoor space and pavement standing spots, which fill with 20-something locals.

**Opera** (ul Rakovski 113; ☎ 9am-midnight) Below the neoclassical opera house, this bar adds serious chic to royal past (modern covers drape ornate, antique chandeliers).

**Khambara** (ul 6 Sevtemvri 22; ☎ 8pm-late) Located in a century-old grain storage building, where a WWII antifascist (thus illegal) press was based, this low-key, candle-lit place is unsigned, and down a dark path (watch out for the fanged gnomes). Jazzy music is kept low.

## ENTERTAINMENT

### Cinemas

**Dom na Kinoto** (☎ 980 7838; ul Ekzarh Iosif 37; tickets 4lv) alternates three or four films on its screen, while **United Cinema Multiplex** (☎ 951 5101; NDK; tickets 4-6lv) is a more modern theatre.

### Nightclubs

Sofia's big kids' favourite disco is **Escape** (☎ 0887-468 005; ul Angel Kánchev 1; cover 3-5lv; ☎ 8.30pm-late). **Exit Club** (☎ 0887-965 026; ul Lavele 16; ☎ 8pm-late) is a gay-friendly club with house music and food.

## Live Music

**O'Shipka!** (☎ 944 1288; ul Shipka 11; ☎ 24hr) The basement club of this pizza place has a very welcoming vibe and interesting rock shows or arty slide deals (entry free to 3lv) on weekdays only.

**Viad** (☎ 934 4004; cnr ul General Gurko & ul Rakovski; admission 3-10lv; ☎ 9pm-late) In the if-you-can't-beat-'em-join-'em column, Bulgaria's infamous *chalga* music lights up this cheesy basement supper club (with stars such as Azis and Malina) playing most nights but Sunday and Monday.

**National Opera House** (☎ 987 1366; www.geobiz.com/stopera; ul Vrabcha 1) Opera is taken seriously in this country and this place features Sofia's best.

## Sport

**Levski** (☎ 989 2156) and **CSKA** (☎ 963 3477) are Sofia's most popular football teams. **National Stadium** (☎ 988 5030; Borisova Gradina) is the main venue.

## Theatre

**Ivan Vazov National Theatre** (☎ 986 2252; www.nationaltheatre.bg; cnr uls Dyakon Ignatii & Vasil Levski) Great if you know Bulgarian.

## SHOPPING

The cheapest souvenirs (T-shirts, 'CCCP' stuff) are found in the underground shops, just next to TsUM. Those wanting something more upmarket should try bul Vito-sha's boutique ghetto. Sidewalk vendors on pl Aleksander Nevski sell antiques from the communist era, icons and traditional crafts. A lot of it's fake, but some of the Soviet cameras (10lv and up) are the real deal.

**Souvenir shop** (ul Tsar Osvoboditel; ☎ 10am-6pm) At the Ethnographical Museum, this (pricy) shop is your quick-need-Bulgarian-gift saviour.

**Cohort** (ul Denkoglu 40; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Fri) Particularly good communist-era antiques.

**Stenata** (☎ 980 5491; ul www.stenata.com; ul Bratya Miladinovi 5; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Bulgaria's best outfitter for the woods-bound. The two-floor shop has knowledgeable staff and plenty of big names (Patagonia and a dozen others) for whatever rock-climbing, hiking or camping gear you need. It hopes to start renting gear at some point.

**Ladies Market** (ul St Stambolov; ☎ dawn-dusk) A lively, messy market (mostly food) a couple of blocks west of bul Maria Luisa.

**TsUM** (ul Maria Luisa; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) Uniformed door attendants open the door to an ex-communist mall, now filled

## SQUAT SHOPS

In the can-do capitalist fervour that followed the fall of communism, Sofia saw an outbreak of the *klek* (squat shop), a basement-level window that sells coffee, beer, snacks and the like. These days Western-style boutiques are everywhere, but these legacies of the transition – when expanding a basement window was cheaper and quicker than overhauling a ground-floor apartment – are everywhere. Just look for Sofians bent over and holding their backs in pain.

with the Swiss Army and a comrade named Tommy Hilfiger.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Hemus Air flies daily to Varna (€65/100 one way/return), with extra flights in summer, when there are also more flights to Burgas. Travel agents book flights (see p139).

The airport's departures terminal has an **information booth** (☎ 937 2211; www.sofia-airport.bg) and there's an ATM outside, across from the arrivals hall, where you'll find car-rental agencies, a couple of ATMs and foreign-exchange offices.

See p186 for more information on airlines and international routes.

### Bus

#### DOMESTIC BUSES

Modern and highly efficient, Sofia's **Central Bus Station** (☎ 813 3232; www.centralnaavtogara.bg; bul Maria Luisa; ☎ 24hr), next to the train station, has a 24-hour English-speaking information centre to help you find the next bus leaving from **Traffic Market**, a confusing array of bus-ticket stands outside the train station. The upstairs mezzanine has eating areas, and the OK Taxi stand out front is dependable.

One reader found the bus station's two-attendant bathrooms (token needed) helped spur on a 'blissful bowel movement'. Considering a chipped floor tile and waits at the broken turnstile we found it a bit overpriced at 50 stotinki. It's not bad for a 0.20lv tinkle though.

Following are sample bus fares. All go from the central bus station and times are frequent – generally every hour – unless otherwise noted.

**Bansko** 10lv, three hours, four daily (also from Zapad)  
**Belogradchik** 10lv, four hours, one daily (Traffic Market)  
**Blagoevgrad** 6lv to 7lv, two hours  
**Burgas** 17lv to 18lv, 5½ hours  
**Kărdzhali** 12lv to 13lv, four hours  
**Kazanlık** 10lv, three hours  
**Koprivshitsa** 6lv, two hours, twice daily  
**Melnik** 10lv, three hours, once daily  
**Plovdiv** 8lv, two hours  
**Ruse** 14lv, 4½ hours  
**Shumen** 20lv, five hours  
**Sliven** 13lv to 4lv, four hours  
**Smolyan** 116lv to 17lv, 4½ hours, seven daily  
**Troyan** 10lv, four hours, four daily  
**Varna** 22lv to 24lv, six hours  
**Veliko Tărnovo** 12lv to 13lv, 3½ hours  
**Vidin** 15lv, 4½ hours

In summer direct services link Sofia to popular Black Sea destinations such as Nesebăr and Sozopol.

Those heading to Borovets must transfer in Samokov. Minibuses leave for Samokov (4lv, 1½ hours) from Sofia's **Yug Bus Terminal** (☎ 722 345) half-hourly between 7am and 8pm. Ongoing metro construction has blocked the bus link there; take a taxi.

From the **Ovcha Kupel Bus Terminal** (aka Zapad; ☎ 955 5362; bul Tsar Boris III) there are a couple of daily buses to Rila town (6lv, two hours) – important if you're planning to visit Rila Monastery by public transport. There are also frequent buses to Bansko (10lv) from about 7am to 5pm. Reach the station by tram 5 from pl Makedonia, west of the centre on ul Alabin (it's a 20-minute ride).

### INTERNATIONAL BUSES

Many bus companies sell tickets to bordering countries and beyond. Ticket prices can vary, so ask around at Traffic Market. **Matpu** (☎ 981 5653; www.matpu.com; office 58, Traffic Market) is a good agency.

Sample fares:

**Athens** 98lv, 12 to 13 hours, one or two daily (Tuesday to Sunday)  
**Belgrade** 35lv to 59lv, nine hours, two daily  
**Istanbul** 34lv to 40lv, eight to 10 hours, eight daily  
**Skopje** 20lv to 24lv, six hours, three or four daily  
**Thessaloniki** 43lv, six to seven hours, a couple daily

### Train

Sofia's **Central Train Station** (☎ 931 1111; www.bdz.bg; bul Maria Luisa) is a bit confusing, though departures and arrivals are listed in English

on a large computer screen on the main floor, where there's an information booth (but usually no English). You buy same-day tickets for Vidin, Ruse and Varna on the main floor, and all other domestic destinations downstairs. Advance tickets are available at another office downstairs. Finding the right platform isn't always a breeze; ask a few people.

International tickets can be purchased at the **Rila Bureau** (☎ 932 3346; ☎ 24hr) in the northern part of the main floor, or at its **centre office** (☎ 987 0777; ul General Gurko 5; ☎ 7am-6.30pm Mon-Sat).

Sample train fares:

**Athens** seat/sleeper 64/84lv, 12½ hours, three daily  
**Belgrade** 26lv, 7½ hours, two daily  
**Blagoevgrad** 5.50lv, 2½ to three hours, five daily  
**Bucharest** seat/sleeper 36/54lv, 10½ hours, two daily  
**Burgas** 14.30lv, 6½ to 7½ hours, five daily  
**Gorna Oryahovitsa** (near Veliko Tărnovo) 10.70lv, 4½ hours, 10 daily  
**Koprivshitsa** 3.50lv, two to 2½ hours, five daily  
**Istanbul** 36.50lv, 14½ hours, one daily  
**Plovdiv** 8.80lv, 2½ hours, 12 daily  
**Ruse** 14.30lv, seven hours, four daily  
**Varna** 18.70lv, 7½ to 8½ hours, six daily  
**Vidin** 11.20lv, 5½ hours, three daily

Trams 1 and 7 connect the station with pl Sveta Nedelya.

## GETTING AROUND To/From the Airport

An **OK Taxi** (☎ 973 2121) booth in the arrivals hall arranges metered cabs to the centre (about 7lv or 8lv). Outside is a bus stop, where bus 84 leaves for a stop along bul Vasil Levski, near Sofia University. Minibus 30 travels between bul Maria Luisa and the airport.

### Car & Motorcycle

Parking is a problem in Sofia, but signed parking garages are available (1lv per hour, 6lv to 7lv overnight). Watch for speed traps if entering Sofia from the east.

Most travel agents rent out cars. The big names are here, but you'll save by going with local companies. **Drenikov Rent-a-Car** (☎ 944 9532; www.drenikov.com; ul Oborishte 55; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) has several classes of cars from €15 per day – tax is waived if you pay in cash. **Penguin Travel** (☎ 400 1051; ul Orpei 9) will deliver cars (from €19 per day) and free drop-off in Plovdiv's often possible.

## Public Transport

Sofia's trams, buses and metro line run from 5.30am to 11pm and use the same ticket system. A single ride is 0.50lv and a day pass 2.25lv. There are no transfers. Blue ticket booths are near most stops, and many newsstands sell tickets too. Single-ride tickets must be validated once you board; disguised officials charge a 5lv fine if you're caught without one.

Minibuses ply many useful city routes at 1.50lv per ride.

Sofia's relatively new metro line reaches western suburbs but is little use to travellers. A new line, going southeast, was under construction at research time.

## Taxi

Sofia's taxis have a reputation for overcharging foreigners. Chances are less likely if you call for a cab. **OK Taxi** (☎ 973 2121) runs on the meter.

## AROUND SOFIA

### Boyana Бояна

Once a separate village (now officially a part of Sofia), hillside Boyana has a couple of prime-time attractions. The capital's best museum, the **National Historical Museum** (☎ 955 4280; www.historymuseum.org; bul Okolovrusten Pat; adult/student 10/7lv, guide 10lv; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Nov-Mar) didn't do itself a favour by moving from its previous grand locale on bul Vitosha. Now housed in a 1970s presidential palace, it boasts some of the nation's most treasured pieces, such as the world's oldest gold (4th millennium BC) and remarkable Thracian horse decorations.

Built between the 11th and 19th centuries, the inside walls of the **Boyana Church** (☎ 959 0939; adult/student 10/5lv, guide 5lv; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm Apr-Dec, 9am-5pm Jan-Mar), 1.5km south of the museum, feature some 90 medieval frescoes, most dating from 1259. They are certainly among Bulgaria's finest.

Take tram 9 down ul Khristo Botev to Hladnitsa bus stop (the name means 'refrigerator'), where bus 64 goes past the museum to the east then within 200m of the church.

### Vitosha Витоша

The feather in Sofia's cap is this 23km by 13km mountain range (part of Vitosha Nature Park), just south of the city. At summer weekends, many Sofians come to hike, picnic and berry-pick.

It's worth paying 5lv for the Cyrillic trail map *Vitosha Turisticheska Karta* (1:50,000), available in Sofia.

## CHAIRLIFTS

A popular way to get high up quickly is from a couple of lift stations at the mountain's base. When operating, both lifts run from about 9am to 5pm. Hours vary; in some months lifts run only Thursday to Sunday, or just weekends.

The cheaper of the two, **Dragalevtsi** (☎ 961 2189) is 2km up from the Dragalevtsi village bus stop (walk up next to the creek). It's actually two lifts – one to Bai Krăstyo, and a second lift to Goli Vrah (1837m).

**Simeonovo** sends six-person gondolas to the peaks. It costs 5lv to Aleko, a popular base for hikes and more ski lifts.

It's a 30-minute hike between the top of the two lifts.

## HIKES

Dozens of well-marked trails await your boot tread. Popular ones include the steep 90-minute trip up Mt Cherni Vrah (2290m) from Aleko; a three-hour trek east of Mt Sredets (1969m) from Aleko past Goli Vrah to Zlatni Mostove; and a three-hour hike from Boyana Church past a waterfall to Zlatni Mostove.

## SKIING

Cheaper than other Bulgarian slopes (lift tickets 22lv; night skiing 12lv), Vitosha's ski season runs from mid-December to April. There are 29km of ski runs (including one 5km stretch) ranging from easy to very difficult. Rental equipment is available.

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

About 2km south of NDK in Sofia, the useful **Hladnitsa bus stop** (ul Srebărna), just east of bul Cherni Vrah, has several Vitosha-bound buses. Bus 122 leads directly to the Simeonovo chairlift. Bus 64 goes to Dragalevtsi centre and on to Boyana. Get to Hladnitsa bus stop by tram 9, just east of NDK.

# RILA & PIRIN MOUNTAINS

The two Alp-like mountain chains (also national parks) between Sofia and the Greek border are made of serious rocky-topped peaks brimming with rewarding and strenuous hiking paths, clear streams rushing past



monasteries and some appealing towns. It's here that one of Bulgaria's most famous sites, Rila Monastery, stands guarded by mountains. Other access points include Samokov, Bansko and Melnik.

### Hiking

Most paths are well signed. For Rila hikes, the monastery is a possible starting point, with four trails meeting others higher up. Day hikes are certainly possible and *hizhas* (mountain huts) are spaced three to nine hours apart; you can reserve ahead through Zig Zag in Sofia (p139). For longer hikes, it's best to start up at Maliovița (southwest from Samokov), where you can reach the monastery (mostly downhill) on a one- or two-night trip via Sedemte Ezera (Seven Lakes).

Pirin hikes are generally tougher than Rila ones, with more abrupt slopes. In summer it's better to end in (not start from) Melnik, as the steep climbs aren't fun in the particularly hot climate there.

Drop by Zig Zag for tips or tour info. Be sure to get the *Rila* and/or *Pirin* maps (1:55,000) by Kartografia if you're venturing out (each are 5lv). Get more information on these at www.rilationalpark.org and www.pirin-np.com.

### RILA MONASTERY

РИЛСКИ МАНАСТИР

☎ 07054

Bulgaria's most famous **monastery** (admission free; ☎ 6am-9pm or 10pm), set in a towering forested valley 120km south of Sofia, is a popular destination for day-trippers on tours from around the region. The Unesco World Heritage site is gorgeous. It drips with history and is near excellent hikes, but for some travellers an hour here is enough.

Day trips to Rila from Sofia (widely available around the country) range from about €20 to €50 or more. Seeing Rila by public transport is tough (though possible) in a day. Try to avoid crowded summer weekends.

First built in 927, and heavily restored in 1469, the monastery helped keep Bulgarian culture and language alive during Ottoman rule. A fire engulfed most buildings in 1833, but they were rebuilt shortly thereafter.

The entrance to the monastery is from the west at Dupnitsa Gate, and around the east side at Samokov Gate. **Rila village**, 21km away, has a fine hotel and ATM, plus an informa-

tion centre that helps with accommodation (if open!).

### Sights

The 300 monks cells fill four levels of colourful balconies overlooking the large misshapen courtyard. The **Nativity Church**, built in the 1830s, contains 1200 magnificent murals – the ones outside more easily viewed. **Tsar Boris III's tomb** – actually his heart only – is to the right when you enter; it's believed he was poisoned by the Nazis after clamouring to save Bulgaria's Jewish population during WWII. Nearby, the 23m stone **Hrelyu Tower** is all that remains from the 14th century.

The two-storey **Ethnographic Museum** (adult/student 5/3lv; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) houses many ornate woodwork pieces (it's a cross frenzy); museum pride soars over its double-sided Rila Cross, with 140 tiny biblical scenes.

If you have time, hike up the **Tomb of St Ivan** (Grobyat na Sv Ivan Rilski). To reach the start of the 15-minute hike up the clearly marked trail, walk about 3.7km east on the road, behind the monastery.

### Sleeping

There are a couple of hotels, camping grounds and restaurants outside Samokov Gate. You can stay in the **monastery's rooms** (☎ 2208; r with private/shared bathroom €15/10); the attendant often leaves midafternoon. A great spot is **Zodiak** (☎ 088-216 527; s/d incl breakfast 20/40lv, camp sites 10lv), a string of bungalows by the stream, nearly 2km past the monastery.

The nearest *hizha* is about a six-hour walk up.

### Getting There & Away

At the time of research there were no direct buses from Sofia to the monastery, but a lone one (at 3pm) back to Sofia. You can take a bus from Sofia's Ovcha Kupel to Rila village (6lv, two hours) at 10.20am in time for the 12.40pm bus to the monastery. The last bus out is to Dupnitsa (4lv, 90 minutes) at 5.10pm. These times likely will change. If you have a car, you can see Rila then reach Melnik in a single day.

### MELNIK МЕЛНИК

☎ 07437 / pop 275

Amid the jutting, 'sand pyramid' part of the Pirins only 15km from Greece, little quiet Melnik is home to unique whitewashed, stone-walled revival buildings and, frankly,

the country's best wine, which is sold in plastic jugs (2L is 6lv) and served from giant wood barrels. Best yet, many locals swear the wine here is 'hangover free'. Selfless research methods back up their claim.

From the bus stop, roads run on either side of a (mostly dry) creek into town. About 150m up, on the northern side, is a post office, 24-hour ATM and pay phone. There's no bank or internet access.

### Sights

**Mitko Manolev Winery** (Shestaka; admission incl tasting 1lv; ☎ approx 10am-dusk) overlooks town from the hill on the town's east side; follow the road (and handpainted signs) about 350m east of the post office. This 250-year-old winery – carved out of the hill – serves its wines in a nice locale with log stools, looking over the hills.

Located to the south is **Kordopulov House** (admission 3lv; ☎ 10am-9pm summer, 10am-5pm winter), a giant revival-period home with high-ceilinged rooms. Past the winery to the north are the battered remains of the 10th-century **Bolyaskata Kăshata**.

**Church ruins** are everywhere. Head 300m up the big hill to the south (opposite the post office) to see some atop a ridge overlooking town.

The hilltop **Rozhen Monastery** (suggested donation 2lv; ☎ 7am-9pm), 10km east of town by road, was originally built in 1217, but most of what remains was redone in the mid-18th century. It's an atmospheric place, with woodcarvings and a mural-filled church, but best is the **hiking trail** that leads 3km between Melnik and the site; it takes about an hour downhill.

The best option is to bus up to Rozhen village from Melnik (1lv, 20 minutes, four daily), walk 800m up to the hilltop site, then walk back to Melnik (signs point west, going behind the monastery). Some parts of the trail can be slippery; don't chance it during rain.

### Sleeping

Most of the traditional-style private homes let out simple rooms with shared bathroom for roughly 15lv per person. Try the homes on the hillsides.

**Mekhana Megdana** (☎ 088 866 6047; r incl breakfast 25-30lv) Just before the post office, the Megdana has six plain but clean rooms and a busy restaurant.

**Hotel Despot Slav** (☎ 248; s/d incl breakfast 48/60lv) On the main strip heading towards the win-

ery, this hotel has nice, modern rooms with wood floors and TV.

**Litova Kăshata** (☎ 313; www.litovakushta.com; r incl breakfast 70-100lv) Behind the museum, this 10-room modern hotel has an enviable, quiet location – its modern rooms are decorated traditionally and its restaurant spills onto private decks outside. You can ride horses here for 20lv.

### Eating

Pretty much anywhere here you'll pay a little more for your *shopska* salad. A couple of shops sell grocery items. A popular restaurant is **Mencheva Kăshata** (dishes 5-12lv; ☎ 8am-10 or 11pm) is a homy tavern with a few rooms and small deck, halfway to the winery. It serves an egg, cheese and ham 'Melnik Pyramid' for 5lv; save space for sheep yogurt and fresh figs for dessert.

### Getting There & Away

One daily bus connects Melnik with Sofia (10lv, four hours) and the pleasant college town Blagoevgrad (4lv, two hours); its bus station is next to the train station (a couple of kilometres west of the centre) and has connections to Rila village and Bansko.

There are also five daily buses to highway town Sandanski (2lv, 30 minutes), where Spartacus was born (some connecting buses are 200m south of bus station, past pedestrian mall ul Makedonia).

### SAMOKOV CAMOKOB

☎ 0722 / pop 26,500

This scruffy but personable town serves as Borovets' ski-slope hub. It's an ideal place for independent travellers looking for a cheaper base.

The central bus station is off the main street, ul Tărgovska, just west of administrative buildings where you'll find a bank, 24-hour ATM and cinema. A block north of ul Tărgovska is **Internet Zala** (per hr 1lv; ☎ 8am-10pm). Facing it is the two-storey gold **History Museum** (☎ 66712; admission 1lv; ☎ 8am-5pm), with a mill model that (noisily) turns when clicked on plus exhibits of local journo Konstantin Fotinov (museum attendant: 'The first and greatest of Bulgarian journalists').

Some skiers avoid Borovets' lines at **Maliovița**, 25km southwest, which is also a good hiking hub in summer.

The best hotel is the sprightly, four-room **Relax Hotel** (☎ 24284; www.relaxhotel-bg.com; d incl breakfast 50lv), across from the museum. A block

west is the scrappier but cheaper **Hotel Koala** (☎ 0899-411 378; ul Mikail Koneb 25; s/d 30/36lv), with a downstairs restaurant; it's about 300m from the station.

Samokov's **bus station** (☎ 66540) sends frequent buses from 7.30am to 7pm to Borovets (1.20lv) and from 6am to 7pm to Sofia (4lv, 1½ hours). There are four daily buses to Maliovtitsa (3lv, one hour) and Plovdiv (7lv, three hours).

## BOROVETS БОРОВОЦ

The ski slopes of Bulgaria's first ski resort, in the central-north Rila mountains about 70km southeast of Sofia, boom between December and April. Its 23 ski runs (which are better than Mt Vitosh's) include Bulgaria's longest. Ski equipment is on hand (about 20lv or 25lv daily); the 50lv lift pass drops to 30lv on weekends, when locals pour in. There are many resorts here that cater to package tours.

Half-hourly minibuses go to Samokov. A taxi costs about 10lv to/from Samokov.

## BANSKO БАНСКО

☎ 07443 / pop 8910

Far more than the ski town it's known to be, friendly Bansko – at the base of Mt Vihren (2914m) and the Pirin mountains – probably has the country's best *mekhanas* (festive tavern restaurants), with rollicking folk bands playing many nights all year. It's aiming for the 2014 Olympics though, and development is running rampant. A couple of years ago all souvenir signs were in Bulgarian – now they're in English. Still, it's a fun base for skiing and summer hikes.

### Orientation

Buses and trains stop about 300m north of the central pl Nikola Vaptsarov, reached along ul Todor Aleksandrov. From the square ul Pirin goes south to pl Vúzhrazhdane and on to the ski lifts and, 2km further, the Pirin National Park entrance. West of pl Nikola Vaptsarov is the short pedestrian mall, ul Tsar Simeon.

### Information

The **tourist information centre** (pl Nikola Vaptsarov) is generally closed and of no use. Aside from the many foreign-exchange offices, try **DSK Bank** (ul Tsar Simeon; ☎ 8am-noon & 1.30-4.30pm Mon-Fri), with an ATM. **Internet Club Zonata** (ul Bulgaria 22; per hr 1lv; ☎ 8am-10pm), a block north, is one of the few places to get online.

### Sights

The **Káshta-Museum of Nikola Vaptsarov** (☎ 8304; pl Nikola Vaptsarov; admission 2lv; ☎ 8am-5 or 5.30pm) is dedicated to an appealing local poet who lived here at a time when words could get you shot. (And did.) Arrested for antifascist poems written during WWII, Vaptsarov was executed in 1942 at the same age as Jesus, a fact not lost on the curators here. Ask to hear the tape in English.

The **Sveta Troitsa Church** (pl Vúzhrazhdane; ☎ 7.30am-5 or 6pm) is particularly striking for its wood-carved interior and gloomy, faded murals.

**Káshta-Museum of Neofit Rilski** (☎ 8272; ul Pirin 17; admission 3lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5pm), behind the church, has five revival-style rooms.

### Activities

#### HIKING

Paths to the Pirin Mountains are accessed just south of town. In summer minibuses go to Banderitsa (about 4lv, three daily) to access trails to lakes and *hizhas*.

#### SKIING

The ski season in Bansko lasts from mid-December to April. And it's good skiing. There are two major mountains – the lower Chalin Valog and the bigger Shiligarnika, higher up – with 26km of runs (7km of night skiing, too). A lift pass for all four lifts is 50/30lv for a full/half day; rentals are about 18lv to 30lv. If you like old-school lifts, and shorter lines, consider bussing 6km east to **Dobrinishte**.

### Festivals & Events

The **Pirin Sings Folk Festival** is staged nearby in August in odd-numbered years, as is the **International Jazz Festival**.

### Sleeping

A hotel boom is happening as Bansko braces for the potential Olympics – most are medium-sized ski centres. Prices generally drop by 20% in summer.

**Hotel Tipik** (☎ 8185; ul Tado Aleksandrov 15; s/d 20/40lv) A nice budget hotel with small but clean rooms a block south of the stations.

**Alpin Hotel** (☎ 8075; ul Neofit Rilski 6; s/d incl breakfast 34/47lv) With 17 older but clean rooms on an atmospheric lane, this is ski central – with equipment, lessons, rides to the lift – and afterwards a spell in the sauna for 5lv.

**Dvata Smarcha** (☎ 2632; ul Velyan Ognev 2; s/d incl breakfast 36/72lv) One of many *mekhanas* that

offer rooms, this one is 50m southeast of pl Vúzhrazhdane and has eight gorgeous rooms and a garden sitting area.

**Star Pod Naem** (☎ 3998; bul Bulgaria 33; d/tr €20/30) An alpine-style guesthouse run by a sweet English-speaking mum-and-daughter team. There's a basement kitchen with TV to use, and the rooms are spotless, with TVs. Prices drop by €6 or €7 off season. It's a block north of the bank.

### Eating

In ski season, most life is on ul Pirin, in the (more modern) blocks south of pl Vuzhrazhdane (and the old district) towards the lifts. But the most appealing *mekhanas* – with wood-beamed ceilings, hanging vines and live bands – are on the cobbled lanes north of the square. **Kasapinova Káshta** (ul Yane Sandanski 4; dishes from 7lv; ☎ noon-midnight) is a slightly touristy one; waiters sit with you when ordering. It's good, but there are dozens more to choose from.

### Getting There & Away

From the **bus station** (☎ 8420; ul Patriarh Evtimii), buses go to Sofia (10lv, three hours, frequent), Blagoevgrad (5lv, one hour, 10 daily) and Plovdiv (9lv, 3½ hours, two daily).

Bansko is on the wonderful narrow-gauge railway through mountains to Septemvri (on the Sofia–Plovdiv line). The **train station** (ul Akad Yordan Ivanov) is next to the bus station. The train (4lv, five hours, three daily) goes slowly, but offers great glimpses of local life both out the window and in the train carriage. If bored, count tunnels and stops (at last tally, tunnels beat stops 31 to 18).

## PLOVDIV & RODOPI MOUNTAINS

Bulgaria's second city, Plovdiv, lies just within the cusp of the Thracian plain, with the deeply forested Rodopi Mountains (with culturally rich villages) looming to the south. Plovdiv is the easiest gateway to Smolyan (the key Rodopi hub) and Pamporovo ski resort, but less frequent buses (with changes) do connect the Pirin mountains to the west.

### Hiking

Shiroka Laka, 24km northwest of Smolyan, is a good base for hikes (with more day-

hike potential than the Rila or Pirin ranges). A popular one is the five-hour hike south to Golyam Perelik (where there's a *hizha*) or there's a two-day hike from Shiroka to Trigrad via Mugla (a mountain village with accommodation). A shorter hike connects Trigrad with Yagodina Cave in less than three hours. The international trail E8 plies the Rodopis.

Trail maps (5lv each) split the Rodopis into the western and eastern ranges.

Ask at one of the Smolyan tourist offices for hiking tips, or drop by Zig Zag in Sofia (p139).

## PLOVDIV ПЛОВДИВ

☎ 032 / pop 341,500

Probably Bulgaria's most appealing city, Plovdiv has it all – Roman walls and theatre seats spilling out under walkways and aside hills, and a compact, cobbled 19th-century revival-era district with open-air cafés frequented by the city's students. Bulgarians love it, some foreigners give it a shrug after a day, but any Bulgarian site in the hunt for 'country's best' must reckon with The Plov.

Known as Philippopolis to the Romans in the 3rd century AD, but settled thousands of years before by Thracians, Plovdiv has several plump hills – mounds really – that look like burps from the Rodopi mountains southwest.

### Orientation

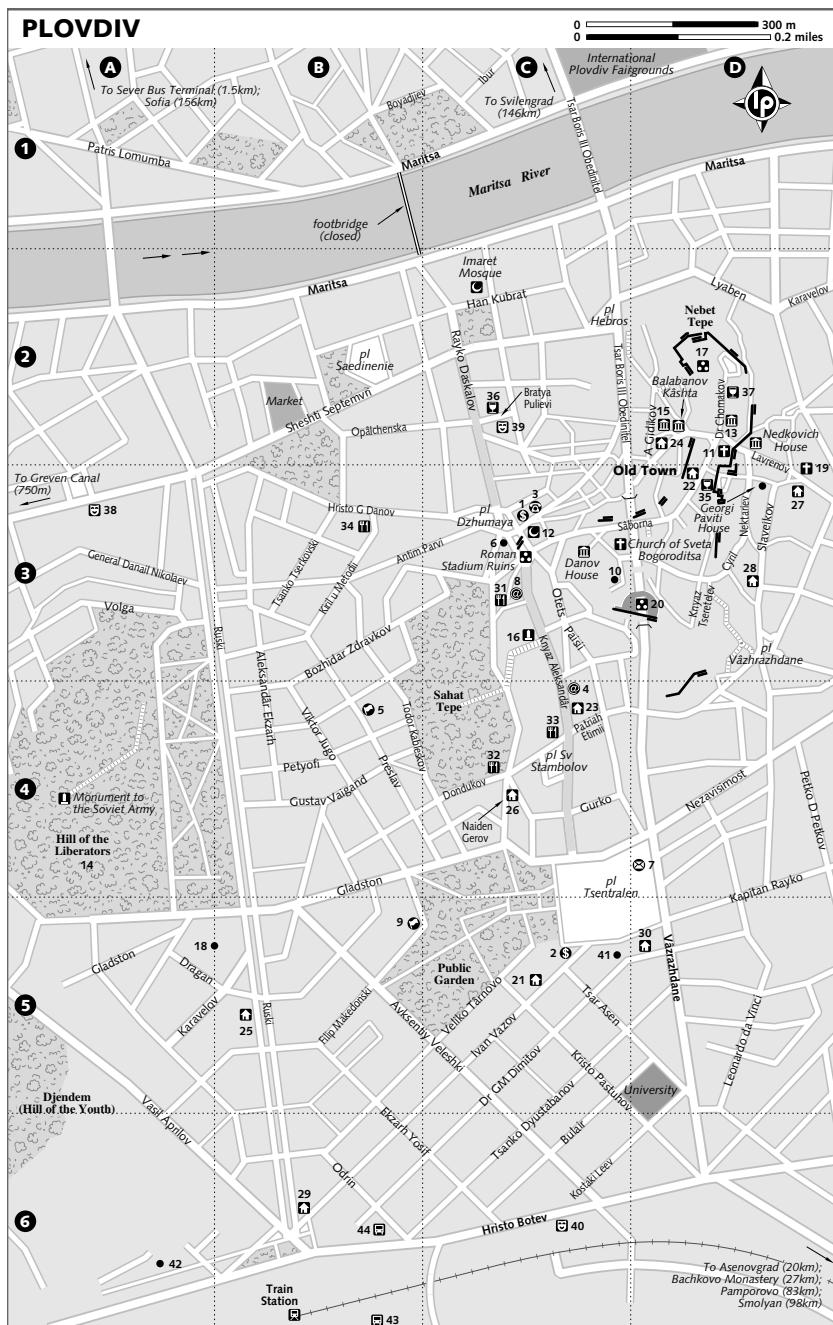
Plovdiv's train station and (main) Yug Bus Terminal are about 600m southwest of the central pl Tsentralen. From the square, the main pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Aleksandár, stretches 500m north to pl Dzhumaya. East from pl Dzhumaya, via ul Sáborna, is Old Town, which is easily explored by foot. The centre's northern border is the reed-filled Maritsa River.

### Information

Plovdiv sorely lacks an official tourist information centre. Foreign-exchange offices and ATMs abound along the pedestrian mall (ul Knyaz Aleksandár) and also on ul Ivan Vazov.

### BOOKSHOPS

**Litera** (pl Dzhumaya; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Bookshop with some English-language titles and maps.



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### INTERNET ACCESS

**Fantasy Internet Club** (1st fl, ul Kynaz

Aleksandär 31; per hr 0.80lv;

☎ 24hr

**Speed** (ul Kynaz Aleksandär 10; per hr 0.60lv;

☎ 24hr) Also offers international calls for 0.12lv per minute.

### LEFT LUGGAGE

The train station has 24-hour luggage storage (2lv per piece per day); the Yug bus station holds small bags (only) for 0.50lv per day.

### MONEY

**Bank DCK** (ul Rayko Daskalov; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri)

**Bulbank** (ul Ivan Vazov 4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri)

### POST

**Main post office** (pl Tsentralen; ☎ 7am-7pm Mon-Sat, 7am-11am Sun)

### TELEPHONE

**Call Centre** (ul Balkan; international calls per min 0.15lv; ☎ 9.30am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-8pm Sun)

### TRAVEL AGENCIES

**Inter Jet Tours** (☎ 635 001; www.interjet-bg.com; 2nd fl, ul Knyaz Aleksandär 35; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Arranges treks and rents cars (from €15 per day, with free drop-off in Sofia).

### Sights

Plovdivniks sure love their hills – don't leave without climbing at least one. **Hill of the Liberators** (Bunardjika Park) is the most prominent; the lonely bloke up top is 'Alyosha', a Russian soldier.

### OLD TOWN

Revival-era wood-shuttered homes lean over wee cobbled lanes (and antique shops – some of Bulgaria's better souvenir shops actually) in this hilly neighbourhood, which is practically a free, living museum.

Seeing the 22 rooms inside the Old Town's most striking building (built in 1847) is an added bonus to the country's finest **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 625 654; ul Dr Chomakov 2; admission 4lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5 or 5.30pm). It has many traditional outfits upstairs, including the masked *kukeri* costumes from the Rodopi region with pointed noses and bell-belts.

A handful of other 'baroque' homes are open to visit, including **Hindliyan Käshta** (☎ 628 998; ul Artin Gidikov 4; adult/student 3/1lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri), an 1835 two-storey home that really evokes the period. Its basement cellar doubles as a **wine museum** (☎ 635 376; three wine tastings 5lv; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Mon-Fri).

One of the country's most impressive Roman ruins, the **Theatre of Ancient Philippopolis** (admission 3lv; ☎ 9am-5.30pm summer, 9am-5.30pm Wed-Sun winter), is easily seen from outside the gates,

but entry lets you tread on worn steps approaching their 2000th birthday. The theatre holds various events from June to October.

Tucked behind walls, the **Church of St Constantine & Elena** (ul Sáborna 24; admission free; ☞ dawn-dusk) dates from the 4th century AD, though much of what you see was rebuilt in 1832.

The **Ruins of Eumolpias** (ul Dr Chomakov; admission free; ☞ 24hr), scattered upon Nebet Tepe hilltop, date from a Thracian settlement from about 5000 BC. Look for a green-and-white smoke-stack of the Kamenitza brewery (Plovdiv's so-so beer) to the southeast. Some of the stuff gets drunk up here too.

Be sure to poke around the back streets: the ones down the hill to the east are less commercial. Here you can see the walled **Sveta Nedelya Church** (ul Slaveikov 40), which originally dates from 1578 and has a frickin' dragon-slaying mural inside.

#### OTHER SIGHTS

The **Dzhumaya Mosque** (Friday mosque; pl Dzhumaya; admission free; ☞ dawn-dusk) originally dates from 1368 – the first in Balkan Europe – but was renovated after a 1928 earthquake (note the cracks inside).

The nation's biggest canal, the impressive 2.5km river-fed **Greven Canal**, is an interesting detour, about 1km west of the centre. Bulgaria's last communist-built project features jogging races and is surrounded by jogging paths and shady Loven Park. Take bus 10 west as far as it goes on ul Sheshti Septemvri, then walk 200m northwest.

Don't laugh, but the **Excelsior** (ul Knyaz Aleksandar 24; ☞ 10am-8pm Mon-Fri, 11am-8pm) is a 'neo-Roman' mall with some (allegedly) real ruins to see in its basement, and nice views from the roof.

#### Courses

A number of foreigners have taken classes in traditional Bulgarian instruments or folk singing at Plovdiv's **Art Academy** (☞ 679 218; www.artacademyplovdiv.com, ul Todor Samoudomov 2), near the Roman theatre.

#### Sleeping

Many visitors to Plovdiv opt for a private room – there are plenty of options. If a cuddly tout doesn't find you on arrival, a reliable agency is **Esperansa** (☞ 260 653, 0897-944 951; ul Ivan Vazov 14; s/d 20/30lv, s/d apt from 40/50lv), a nine-minute walk from the main stations. It

arranges rooms in homes or private apartments. It's in the back of the building.

#### BUDGET

**Hiker's Hostel** (☞ 0885-194 553; www.hikers-hostel.org; ul Sáborna 53; dm/d incl breakfast 20/48lv; ☞) Plovdiv's top backpacker stop is this little house in Old Town. The staff is plenty laid-back. (The hostel car, toaster, washing machine and door knob were out of service at last pass; one attendant said, 'I rarely go into town' – about a 100m walk downhill!) The eight-bunk dorm room is kept clean, while the cramped private room is really a converted storage space. There's free internet, frequent parties (music: Doors, Marley) and a big sitting space with views.

**Tourist's House** (Turisicheska Káshtha; ☞ 635 115; ul Slaveikov 5; dm 20lv) Just down the back side of Old Town's hill (but still feeling a part of it), this 19th-century, three-storey 'hostel' (briefly closed at last pass, but reopening) has cheap beds in a traditional building. High wood-carved ceilings loom over rooms. Some rooms are let as private rooms.

**PBI Hostel** (☞ 326 384; www.pbihotel.com; ul Naiden Gerov 13; dm/r €10/15; ☞) Maybe PBI means 'problems being in', as the staff frequently aren't around to let travellers in. It's lacking much charm. Three dorm rooms and a lone private room.

#### MIDRANGE

**Trakiya Hotel** (☞ 622 355; ul Ivan Vazov 84; s/d 30/60lv) This cheerful place is near the train and main bus stations. Double-glazed windows and thick curtains keeps out noise and light from after-hours activity nearby. The 10 comfy rooms have fans, and at least one a German football blanket.

**Rooms** (☞ 665 177; ul Tsanko Alavrenov 14; r 40-50lv) Three simple rooms in an Old Town home, across from Svetya Nedelya church.

**Hotel Leipzig** (☞ 632 250; www.leipzig.bg; bul Ruski 70; s/d incl breakfast from 40/50lv; ☞) West of the centre and standing a dozen storeys in its (faded) salmon-and-blue colour scheme, this 120-room hotel's East German name gives an idea of when it was built. Bright blue carpets keep rooms a little fresh. The higher floors have great views.

#### TOP END

**Hotel Hebros** (☞ 260 180; www.hebros-hotel.com; ul Stoilov 51; s/d incl breakfast €79/95; ☞) Those looking for a classic Old Town sleep should opt

for this inviting 10-room inn. There's a back courtyard, spa and sauna. Each of the 10 big rooms is done up in lush 19th-century design, with varying looks. The restaurant on premises (right) is one of Plovdiv's best.

**Hotel Bulgaria** (☞ 633 599; www.hotelbulgaria.net; ul Patriah Etimii 13; s/d incl breakfast from €39/61 Fri-Sun, €44/68 Mon-Thu; ☞ ☞) It's location, right off the pedestrian crawl, makes this 59-room hotel worth considering, even though the standard rooms show some wear and tear (peeling wall paint and some carpet stains) and the bathrooms are small.

**Trimontium Princess Hotel** (☞ 605 000; reservation@trimontium-princess.com; pl Tsentralen; s/d incl breakfast from 128/178lv Fri-Sun, 167/217lv Mon-Thu; ☞ ☞ ☞) A made-up relic to the palatial from less bourgeois times, the Princess' 158 rooms are comfy, though not quite reaching the five-star standard they flag (there are nicks on some of the side tables). Pay 20lv extra to get the spa rooms, with separate TV room and newer carpets.

#### Eating

Most of the pedestrian-mall spots are drinks-oriented, with a menu as an afterthought. Kebab and pizza stands (for 1lv or 1.50lv) are everywhere, particularly north of pl Dzhumaya on ul Rayko Daskalov. King of both, however, is alley-hub **Alaeddin** (ul Kynaz Aleksandar; two doner kebabs 1lv, pizza slices 1.50lv; ☞ 24hr), which draws lines all day.

**Orientalaska Cladkarnitsa Dzhumyata** (ul Blakan; baklava 2lv; ☞ 7.30am-9pm Mon-Sat, 7.30am-8pm Sun) Built right into the 14th-century mosque, this pastry shop serves Plovdiv's best fresh, flaky baklava.

**Liliya** (ul Kiril u Metodii 2; dishes 1-2lv; ☞ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) A bustling pick-and-point

cafeteria that's less fluorescent bulb than most. Prices drop by 20% after 4pm.

**Dayana** (ul Dondukov; grills from 2.20lv; ☞ 24hr) Aside the rocky walls of Sahat Tepe hill are several great choices, including this sprawling spot with the usual Bulgarian grill items plus ham'n'egg plates all day (1.70lv) and a host of vegetarian options (3.20lv) on the English photo menu. Inside there's traditional seating in a sprawling dining room with lots of windows to look out on the (preferable) leafy courtyard.

**Dreams** (pl Sv Stambolov; sandwiches 2.10-2.40lv; ☞ 9am-11pm) Set up like a fast-food café, Dreams serves good hot sandwiches, plus plenty of desserts and cocktails. In summer, it takes over a good chunk of the square. Plus there's a Coke and coffee combo for 2lv – dreams do come true, sometimes.

**Hotel Hebros** (☞ 260 180; ul Stoilov 51; mains 12-21lv; ☞ 11am-midnight) Even if you can't spring for the rooms, Hebros' cosy basement (and courtyard) is one of Old Town's best dining spots. Live music is held nightly, and the menu changes frequently, with superbly prepared 'European' dishes such as rabbit with plums (12lv), salmon in mustard sauce (21lv) and a few vegetarian options (9lv).

#### Drinking

**Rahap Tepe** (ul Dr Chomakov; snacks 1.20-4lv; ☞ 10am-midnight Apr-Oct) Near Old Town's highest point, this open-air bar has nice views west – enjoyed by many a midday and late-day beer sipper.

**Marmalad** (ul Bratya Pulievi 3; cocktails 3lv; ☞ 9am-2am) On a side lane, the ultramod Marmalad has cream leather booths and stools on old wooden floors. The music is kept chat-encouraging soft – until the basement night-

#### QUIRKY-IRKY PLOVDIV

##### Hug the 'Great Gossiper'

The big-eared statue in the central steps of the pedestrian mall honours Milyu, the great gossiper of Plovdiv in the 1980s and '90s, who won fans for his subtle listenings-in of passers-by. Near the **Milyu Statue** in summer a speaker sometimes pipes out old Milyu sayings in Bulgarian.

##### Do hills have ghosts?

Proudly a seven-hill town (like Rome), Plovdiv up and lost one during the communist era, when city authorities broke it down to rubble to provide stone steps around Old Town. Pay tribute to the site – with a tear in a beer, or over a *banitsa* – at the walled-off, gaping-hole **seventh hill site**, 100m south of the Hill of the Liberators.

club gets going after 9pm or so. DJs get nods on weekend nights and there are rock shows on Thursday.

**King's Stable** (ul Săborna; cocktails 3.40lv; ☎ 8.30am-2am Apr-Oct) This great open-air bar – behind a host of Old Town buildings – serves drinks and snacks at a leisurely pace.

## Entertainment

Look around for club, restaurant and cinema listings in Bulgarian-language publications: *Programata*, *Navigator* and *Plovdiv Guide* (all free).

## NIGHTCLUBS

**Infinity Club** (☎ 0888-281 431; ul Bratya Pulevi 4; ☎ 10pm-late Mon-Sat) is a long-popular disco in the centre, while **Plazma** (☎ 624 761; bul Hristo Botev 82; ☎ 10pm-8am Wed-Sat) sees body-to-body dancing under the unnerving charms of the disco ball.

## CINEMAS

**Flamingo Cinema** (☎ 644 004; ul Sheshti Septemvri 128; tickets 3lv) Foreign films are shown at several venues, including this four-screen theatre.

## Getting There & Away BUS

Plovdiv has three bus stations. The main **Yug Bus Terminal** (☎ 626 916; ul Hristo Botev), 100m northeast of the train station, gets the honours for Sofia-bound buses. Just south of the train station (reached by underground passageway), the new **Rodopi Bus Terminal** (☎ 765 160) sends buses south and to Kazanlak and Shumen. The third, 1½ km north of the river, **Sever Bus Terminal** (☎ 935 705) has services to Veliko Tărnovo and Koprivshtitsa.

Sample fares follow; buses leave/arrive at Yug unless otherwise noted:

**Athens** (via Sofia) 108lv, 15 hours, one to three daily

**Bansko** 9lv, four hours, one daily (at 3pm)

**Blagoevgrad** 10lv, four hours, one daily

**Burgas** 14lv, four hours, two daily

**Istanbul** 25lv to 30lv, six hours, 10 daily

**Kazanlak** 6.50lv, two hours, three daily (Sever)

**Koprivshtitsa** 5lv, two hours, one daily (Sever)

**Pamporovo** 7lv, two hours, hourly 6am to 7pm or 8pm except noon (Rodopi)

**Ruse** 14lv, seven hours, one daily (Sever)

**Shumen** 15lv, 5½ hours, one daily (Rodopi)

**Sliven** 8lv, 2½ hours, six daily

**Smolyan** 7.50lv, 2½ hours, hourly 6am to 7pm or 8pm except noon (Rodopi)

**Sofia** 9lv to 10lv, two hours, every 30 minutes or hour 6am to 8pm

**Thessaloniki** 32lv, nine hours, two daily

**Troyan** 7lv, 3½ hours, one daily (Sever)

**Varna** 9.20lv, seven hours, two daily (Yug or Sever)

**Veliko Tărnovo** 10lv, 4½ hours, three daily (Sever)

International tickets only can be purchased from **MTT** (☎ 624 274; pl Tsntralen). **Medilien** (☎ 632 095; Yug bus station) handles tickets for Black Sea destinations.

## TRAIN

Direct trains from Plovdiv's **train station** (☎ 622 729; bul Hristo Botev) include the following (prices are for 1st-class seats; 2nd-class tickets save 1lv to 2lv):

**Belgrade** 35lv, 7½ hours, one daily

**Burgas** 12.80lv, five hours, three daily

**Istanbul** 35/48lv seat/sleeper, 11 hours, one daily

**Septemvri** 4.90lv, 45 minutes, frequent

**Sofia** 6.50, 2½ hours, frequent

**Varna** 16.70lv, six hours, three daily

**Veliko Tărnovo** 8.90lv, six hours, at least one daily

For international tickets, go to **Rila Bureau** (☎ 643 120; bul Hristo Botev 31a; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat).

## Getting Around

It's easy to get around Plovdiv's centre by foot. On arrival, take bus 7, 20 or 26 in front of the train station (0.60lv) and exit on ul Tsar III Obedinitel past the tunnel to reach Old Town.

## AROUND PLOVDIV

Plovdiv is a bit too stranded in the Thracian plain to catch much Rodopi action by day. The closest and most rewarding trip is 20km south to **Asenovgrad**, a modest town at the start of the hills, with an 11th-century **fortress** with great views atop the hills. Smolyan-bound buses stop here.

Another 7km south (past the Chepelarska Gorge), **Backhovo Monastery** (admission free; ☎ 6am-10pm) is Bulgaria's second biggest and is a nice stop-off, particularly if you have your own wheels and are heading deeper into the Rodopi. Founded in 1083 and restored in the 17th century, Backhovo's central courtyard is filled with a 12th-century **Archangel Church** and a larger 17th-century **Church of the Assumption of Our Lady**. Buses bound for Smolyan will let you off here, at the southern end of the village.

## PAMPOROVO ПАМПОРОВО

☎ 3021

This popular ski resort 83km south of Plovdiv has eight ski runs and 25km of cross-country trails in a pine-thick mountain-top location. Rental equipment is about 30lv and a lift ticket 48lv. A bus connects the centre (near the T-junction of the roads to Smolyan, Plovdiv and Shiroka Lăka/Devin, where the bus stop is) to the lifts. It's quiet off-season, though you can hike up **Mt Perelik** (2190m) from here.

Most people book tours, or book way ahead, to stay in resort hotels sprinkled along the roads around the lifts. Talk to the **information centre** (☎ 8442) about hotels, or contact the Smolyan information centres. One good-value one, 6km from the lifts, is **Raikovski Livadi** (☎ 0301-35683; s/d 30/46lv).

Buses travelling between Plovdiv and Smolyan stop here.

## SMOLYAN СМОЛЯН

☎ 0301 / pop 32,100

With its setting in a sweeping valley between sky-scraping Rodopi peaks of mixed greens, Smolyan could be Bulgaria's most beautiful city. But on the streets, which are spread out and 'lacking harmony with nature', as one local complains, it feels a bit lacklustre. That said, the location (near Pamporovo's ski runs) wins out and Smolyan swings its own swagger with remarkably good attractions.

## Orientation & Information

Buses arrive near the west end of long bul Bulgaria (at the 'old centre'). About 250m east it becomes a pedestrian mall, where you'll find a **tourist office** (☎ 65 448; bul Bulgaria 80; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Mon-Fri). About 200m further is **Access Internet Club** (per hr 1lv; ☎ 24hr), then the **Telephone Centre** (per min 0.36lv; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm) 150m further still. After the pedestrian mall ends, you'll find a **Bulbank** (☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) with an ATM.

Another 1km east on bul Bulgaria, near the museums, is another (much more helpful) **tourist office** (☎ 62 530; www.smolyan.com; bul Bulgaria 5; ☎ 9am-noon & 12.30-5.30pm Mon-Fri), with great handouts on hikes and accommodation.

## Sights

The **Historical Museum** (☎ 62 727; pl Bulgaria 3; adult/student 5/3lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun), a five-minute walk up steps (just east of the tourist office in the new centre), is one of the nation's best, with numerous English signs

on three floors outlining Bulgaria's ethnographical past. Highlights include an artful display of hanging bells and full-bodied *kukeri* costumes (think *Star Wars* bar scene plus chicken feet).

The **Art Gallery** (☎ 62 328; adult/student 5/1lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm), across from the Historical Museum, has seven halls of modern art (mostly Bulgarian), much of which is rather derivative.

The **Planetarium** (☎ 23 074; admission 5lv, minimum 3 visitors; ☎ English shows 2pm), open since 1975, features a domed-ceiling show of outer space (about 40 minutes, also in French and German) that conjures the age of cosmonauts despite its updated soundtrack. The best part is watching the stars for real via the mega-telescope at 6.30pm Wednesday if the sky's clear (admission 2lv). The show in Bulgarian is 3lv.

## Sleeping

The tourist office has a partial list of private accommodation available (about 8lv per person). A lot of new hotels are being built.

**Three Fir-Tree House** (☎ 64 281; dreliannen\_h@yahoo.com; ul Srednogorec 1; s/d 30/40lv) The motherly owner of this lovely hotel is an absolute gem – as proud of her homemade meals (giant breakfast is 5lv, four-course dinner about 15lv) and namesake trees outside as of ensuring homely comfort in her nicely furnished rooms (with hair dryer, iron, free water, sheepskin blankets and balconies). She speaks German and English, and can arrange hikes and visits to Bulgarian bagpipe workshops. It's 250m from the bus station, down the steps at the start of bul Bulgaria's pedestrian mall.

**Hotel Smolyan** (☎ 62 053; www.hotelsmolyan.com; bul Bulgaria 3; s/d incl breakfast 25/42lv; ☎ ☎) This Balkantourist hotel, near the museums in the 'new centre', is trying to keep up with the recent hotel boom – its reduced prices for its fine but older rooms help. There's a pool in summer.

## Eating

Smolyan's pedestrian mall has surprisingly few options for diners. **Pizzeria Luchiya** (pizza 5-6lv; ☎ 7am-11pm) is a slightly older spot with good pies. Even nonguests can opt for a superb dinner at Three Fir-Tree House.

## Getting There & Around

Hourly buses leave Smolyan's **bus station** (☎ 63 104) north to Plovdiv (7.50lv), stopping in Pamporovo (2lv). Smolyan has important,

but infrequent, links into the mountains. At time of research five daily buses left for Shiroka Lâka (2.80lv, 40 minutes). Buses for Kârdzhali leave from Ustov, in Smolyan's eastern reaches.

City buses 1 and 2 go from the bus station past the pedestrian mall and museums. Bus 1 goes to Ustov.

## SHIROKA LÂKA ШИРОКА ЛЪКА

☎ 03030 / pop 1501

Cute Shiroka Lâka, 24km west of Smolyan, is a stream-side town of Roman bridges and 19th-century whitewashed villas, which give a very other-era vibe (maybe it's the dung heaps). The best time to visit is early March, when locals adorn full-bodied animal-like costumes during the *kukeri* festival.

Of all things, there are two good tourist information centres; one **tourist office** (☎ 226; www.shirokaluka.com; ul Kapitan Petko Voivoda 48; ☎ 8.30am-5pm Tue-Sat) is 100m east of the bus stop.

Hikes – overnight or day – loom in the green forested hills. One goes a few hours up to **Gela village**, which has held a bagpipe festival in August in the past. Another goes up **Mt Perelik**.

It's possible to study traditional music (or sit in on a recital) at the revered **Folk Music & Instruments High School** (☎ 333; nufi\_shirokaluka@abv.bg) across the water; it's closed July to mid-September.

The small, family-run **Hotel Kalina** (☎ 675; r incl breakfast summer/winter 15/20lv) is by the centre.

Buses between Devin and Smolyan stop here; it's easy to hail a group taxi for about 2lv or 3lv, too.

## KÂRDZHALI & AROUND КЪДЖАЛИ

☎ 0361 / pop 45,400

Linked to 17th-century Turkish general Kârdzhi Ali by name, and still retaining a large Turkish population (unusual for Bulgarian cities), friendly Kârdzhali looms in a broad valley of the eastern Rodopis, a few curvy hours east of Smolyan by road. It's fairly industrial – a lot of coal is plucked from the mountains nearby – but is near some thrilling archaeological sites and still feels off the tourist circuit.

Housed in a 1930s one-time Muslim school, the artful and well-arranged **Regional History Museum** (☎ 63 584; ul Renublikańska 4; admission 2lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5pm Tue-Sun) has rewarding collections of Thracian and Roman sites in the area – all signed in English.

The main reason to venture here is the recently rediscovered site of **Perperikon**, about 20km east of town (brown signs lead the way, if driving). Atop a rocky bluff (a 45-minute walk up) are stunning indications of Thracian (and later Roman) life – dug-out water tanks and grooves where doors were pivoted open, supposedly part of the Temple of Dionysus – are up to 7000 years old.

About 27km southwest (east of Momchilgrad town) is **Tatul**, a battered Thracian ruins reached by a short dung-splattered trail (there are lots of shepherds here).

The drives along the **Kârdzhali Dam**, just west of the city, take in Turkish villages such as Enchets and Dâzhdownitsa.

Across from the bus station, about 1km south of the centre, **Hotel Kârdzhali** (☎ 82 354; www.hotel-kardjali.com; bul Belomorski 68; s/d 34/55lv; ☎) has simple, modern rooms and friendly staff.

Getting to the sites will require lots of planning, a car or a taxi. Kârdzhali is connected to Smolyan and Plovdiv by bus. Infrequent buses go to villages mentioned here.

## CENTRAL BALKANS

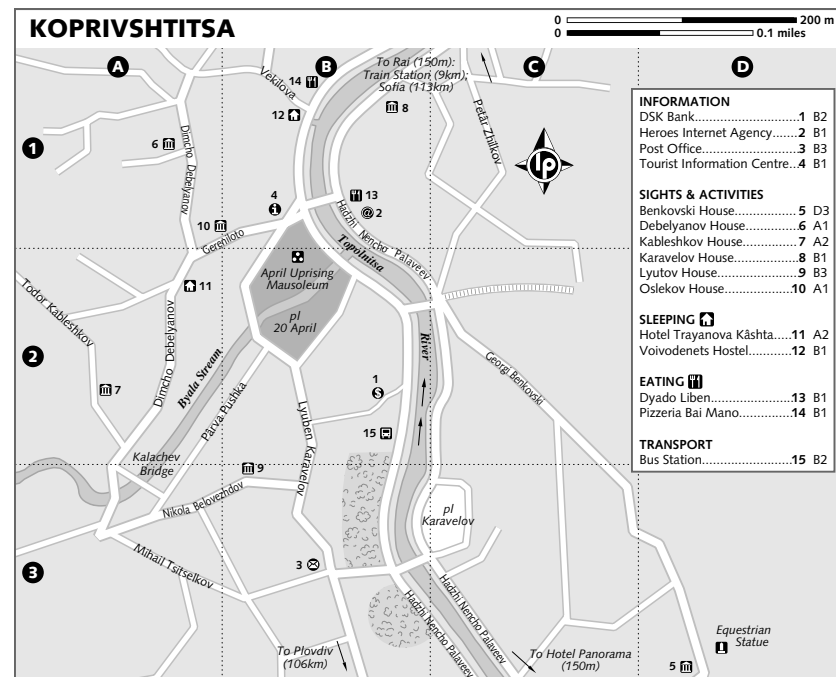
This broad swipe of lovely and surprisingly high mountains – called the Stara Planina (Old Mountain, or Balkans) locally – occupies much of Bulgaria's belly. The area is dotted with towns in 19th-century revival style (Veliko Târnovo, Koprivshtitsa, Tryavna and Kotel are standouts). Some of the many hiking paths through the broad Central Balkans National Park can also be cross-country skied or cycled. The international E3 hiking trail crosses here. Other windswept hubs (Kazanlâk, Sliven and Shumen) are more off the beaten track. Check www.staraplanina.org for more information.

Some travellers find themselves changing trains or buses in the Stara Planina's outer reaches at Stara Zagora, where there's a nice central garden and little else to see.

## KOPRIVSHTITSA КОПРИВШТИЦА

☎ 07184 / pop 2645

Popular with Bulgarian travellers seeking peace and quiet (or cooler temperatures in summer), historical Koprivshtitsa (say it three times fast) offers a glimpse of 19th-century life with its 400 lovely revival-era buildings where you can sleep, eat and get drunk. A babbling creek runs through town, and green



hills with trails surrounding it. It's a great place to kick back.

Koprivshtitsa was the setting for a key early revolt against the Turks: the 20 April 1876 Uprising. Its re-enactment (actually held on 1 May or 2 May) along with the **Folklore Days Festival** (mid-August) are popular annual events.

### Orientation

The town spreads north-south for 1km along a small creek and is walkable. The bus stop is about 100m south of the centre, which is at pl 20 April. The train station (Gara Koprivshtitsa) is 9km north of town.

### Information

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 2191; www.koprivshtitsa.com; pl 20 April; ☎ 9am-7pm summer, 9am-6pm winter) has helpful English-speaking staff that can arrange private stays (usually 20lv to 25lv) and horse-riding trips, rent out bikes (2lv per hour) and sell town maps with hiking information (3.50lv).

The **DSK Bank** (☎ 8am-4pm Mon-Fri), next to the bus station, has a 24-hour ATM and exchanges money. The gold **post office** (Lyuben Karavelov;

☎ 7.30am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri) has telephone services.

**Heroes Internet Agency** (ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 49; per hr 1.2lv; ☎ 9am-midnight) offers unheroic speeds for its Web connection.

### Sights

If you visit a traditional home only once in Bulgaria, make it here. Six of Koprivshtitsa's traditional homes are now 'house museums', and a super-value combo ticket (adult/student 5/2lv) will get you into them all; otherwise it's 2/1lv each. All have signs in English and keep the same hours (9am to 5.30pm summer, 9am to 5pm winter), but alternate Monday or Tuesday off (see listings). The six pack is: **Benkovski House** (ul Georgi Benkovski 5; ☎ closed Tue) Exhibits on the cavalier who continued the 1876 uprising in surrounding areas; it's near an impressive equestrian statue 400m southeast of the centre.

**Debelyanov House** (ul Dimcho Debelyanov 6; ☎ closed Mon) The 'tender poet' who lived here was not as short as the ceiling suggests (the floors were raised for renovation).

**Kableshkov House** (ul Todor Kableshkov 8; ☎ closed Mon) The home of the intriguing chairman of the revolutionary committee, this house has a wavy trifacade

and must-see old photos of blokes with remarkable moustaches.

**Karavelov House** (ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev 39; ☎ closed Tue) Three-section home where the brothers Karavelov grew up.

**Lyutov House** (Topalov House; ul Nikola Belovezhdiv 2; ☎ closed Tue) The most colourful of the homes, with vibrant walls and ceilings.

**Oskelov House** (ul Gereniloto 4; ☎ closed Mon) Detailed home of one of the town's 19th-century tax collectors.

## Sleeping

The tourist office can help arrange private rooms.

**Voivodenets Hostel** (☎ 2145; ul Vekilova 5; dm 7-8lv) An old home with a nice sitting area downstairs but mostly cramped rooms with two to 10 beds in each.

**Hotel Panorama** (☎ 2035; www.panoramata.com; ul Georgi Benkovski 40; s/d/tr/apt incl breakfast 36/48/60/80lv) A super-friendly English-speaking family runs this quickly filled hotel with nice views of the southern part of town (worth the 300m walk from the bus stop).

**Hotel Trayanova Káshta** (☎ 3057; ul Gereniloto 5; r/apt 40/80lv) Off a cobbled lane, this four-room home often fills its huge, traditionally decked-out rooms early.

**Rai** (☎ 2637; ul Dyado Liben 8; d summer/winter 40/50lv) A nice 11-room hotel in an old building just north of the centre.

## Eating

Traditional *káshtas* are found on side streets, some keeping seasonal hours.

**Dyado Liben** (☎ 2109; ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev; dishes 7.50-10lv, grills 2.50-10lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) This good *káshta* is set in a lushly kept revival-era home. There are four dining rooms upstairs; the courtyard fills up in summer. Save room for yogurt with blueberries (3lv) for desert. The two-man band travels the musical highway between Stevie Wonder and *Dr Zhivago*.

**Pizzeria Bai Mano** (ul Hadzhi Nencho Palaveev) For those in need of Bulgaria's other food.

## Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 3044) sends a few buses daily to Sofia's central or Poduene bus station (6lv, 2½ hours); at research time, buses left for Sofia at 6.45am, 8.50am, 12.50pm and 4.55pm. A 6.30am bus (2pm on Sunday) left for Plovdiv (6lv, 2½ hours).

Taxis and local buses meet incoming trains at the Koprivshitsa train station, 9km north of town. Four or five trains go to Sofia (4.60lv, 1¼ to 2½ hours) and one to Burgas (11.20lv, five hours).

## KAZANLÁK КАЗАНЛЪК

☎ 0431 / pop 51,900

Just below towering Shipka Pass, and in the heart of the Valley of Roses, happy Kazanlak isn't yet a mainstream tourist drawcard, but it's moving that way with each new Thracian ruin found in the area. Its annual three-day **Rose Festival** (www.rose-festival.com; ☎ finishes 1st Sun in Jun) is already a huge deal (with some tour groups here to see the crowning of the festival queen), with hotel rates doubling and rose-liquor bottles flowing.

The central pl Sevtopolis is about 400m north of the train and bus stations (via ul Rozova Dolina), with banks, an internet café and the nearby **tourist information centre** (☎ 62817; ul Iskra 4; ☎ 8.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri summer, hours vary winter).

## Sights

Long famous for its 'rose capital' status, Kaz these days is refashioning itself as the 'Valley of the Thracian Rulers'. Already 40 tombs have been found.

The go-to place for Thracian tomb information is a couple of blocks north of pl Sevtopolis at the **Iskra Museum & Art Gallery** (☎ 63741; ul Slaveikov 8; admission 2lv; ☎ 9am-5pm). It has plenty of Bulgarian art, and lots of Thracian and Roman pieces (including a copy of the 5th-century golden mask, believed to be King Sert III's likeness, found in 2004).

Kazanlak's **Tyulbe Park** (about 300m north-east of the centre) houses the small, 3rd- or 4th-century **Tomb of Kazanlak** (admission 20lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct), a remarkably well-preserved Unesco World Heritage site with ceiling paintings and a nice echo. You can get the idea at the far cheaper **tomb copy** (☎ 64750; admission 3lv; ☎ approx 9am-5pm).

More rewarding is the energetically run **Kosmatka** (admission 3lv; ☎ 9am-5pm), just south of the pleasant town of Shipka (about 10km north, reached by hourly bus 6). The illuminated-at-night mound (which you can climb) has three chambers where the 5th-century tomb of Sert III was found in 2004.

Near Tyulbe Park, **Kulata Ethnological Complex** (☎ 21733; admission 3lv; ☎ 8am-6pm May-Oct, by arrange-

ment Nov-Apr) is a revival-style 'village' with rose-liquor tastings and (often) live music.

## Sleeping

**Hadzhi Eminova Káshta** (☎ 62595; bul Nikola Petkov 22; r 25lv, apt 40 & 50lv) Next to the Kulata complex, this place has four good-value rooms in an 180-year-old building.

**Grand Hotel** (☎ 63440; www.hotelkazanlak-bg.com; pl Sevtopolis 1; s/d 35/44lv; ☎) A former Balkantourist hotel has refashioned itself for modern times – new furnishings and balconies hanging over the square surely help.

## Eating

Pl Sevtopolis might as well be 'Little America', with restaurants and clubs named for Hollywood and Manhattan. Kaz's favourite pizzeria is **New York Bar & Grill** (pl Sevtopolis; pizza from 3lv, grills 3-5lv; ☎ 10am-midnight), featuring salads named for all New York's boroughs but Staten Island.

## Getting There & Away

Daily bus services include four buses to Plovdiv (10lv, 2½ hours), one to Veliko Tarnovo (6lv, three hours), five or six to Sofia (20lv, three hours) and two to Burgas (12lv, three hours).

A few daily trains head to Sofia (8.30lv, 3½ hours) and Burgas (8.30lv, three hours).

## SLIVEN СЛИВЕН

☎ 044 / pop 96,000

Where plains meet 1000m craggy peaks (and the rare tourist), Sliven – known as Bulgaria's 'windy city' and home to a big Roma population – is often overlooked, but it can hold its own for a half-day or longer.

Central pl Hadzhi Dimitar is reached by the street of the same name from the train and bus stations, 500m and 750m south respectively. The street curves before hitting a long pedestrian mall, ul Tsar Osvoboditel. Nearby, the golden clock tower houses city hall, a tourist office (open irregular hours), a gallery and a good bookshop.

## Sights

Sliven's top attractions are the views and trails up the **blue rocks** (*sinite skali*), reached by **chairlift** (one way/return 6/10lv; ☎ supposedly 8.30am-3pm). Take bus 116 from the market (facing pl Hadzhi Dimitar, near Hotel Sliven) to the end of the line, where it's a 20-minute walk.

In town, the **Hadzhi Dimitar Museum** (☎ 622 496; ul Asenova 2; admission 2lv; ☎ approx 9am-noon & 2-5pm Mon-

Fri), over the river west of Hotel Sliven, brings to life the local 19th-century revolutionary hero.

## Sleeping

**Hotel Sliven** (☎ 624 056; pl Hadzhi Dimitar, s/d incl breakfast from 25/34lv) A classic communist-era high-rise with dodgy plumbing, 1980s décor and shockingly helpful staff.

**Hotel Kredó** (☎ 625 080; ul Predel 1; r incl breakfast 59lv; ☎) On an alley just west of ul Hadzhi Dimitar (just past the Billa supermarket), this blue-and-gold hotel is Sliven's best midrange value, with cable TV and small balconies.

## Eating

There's plenty to eat and drink along ul Tsar Osvoboditel. A long-time favourite is **Restaurant Maki** (ul Tsar Osvoboditel; pizza 3-5.40lv, dishes 3.50-5.50lv; ☎ 7am-1am), with a fake McDonald's logo and photo menu.

## Getting There & Away

The **bus station** (☎ 626 629) has frequent connections to Burgas (7lv, two hours), Plovdiv (8lv, three hours), Kotel (4lv to 5lv, 1½ hours) and Sofia (14lv). There's also a daily bus to Veliko Tarnovo (8lv).

Most trains on the Sofia-Burgas line stop at the Sliven **train station** (☎ 636 614).

## KOTEL КОТЕЛ

☎ 0453 / pop 6700

Seen by a smattering of Sunny Beach day-trippers in tour buses, Kotel (*Ko-tel*) is a traditional carpet-making centre filled with 19th-century revival-era homes in the Stara Planina's eastern reaches, about 50km north-east of Sliven.

From the bus station walk up a few blocks to the centre, where you'll find an ATM behind the pink city hall. Extending west, ul Izvorska leads past the **Information Business Centre** (☎ 2334; ul Izvorska 14; ☎ 9am-7pm Mon-Fri), which gives out brochures including a hiking map and has internet access (also try www.kotel.bg). The road curves left, past a carpet-making factory you can visit, and comes out on a main road, where a trellis-covered pedestrian lane, ul Khrum Petrov, leads eventually to Izvorite Park.

## Sights

Kotel has several museums. Its best is the dramatic **History Museum** (National Revival Kotel Enlighteners; ☎ 2549; admission 1.60lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-5pm) in the blob-like 1981 building facing the



city hall. In four halls, English signs tell how Kotel boys made a big impact on Bulgarian culture and history. The main attraction is the mausoleum for Georgi Rakovski, a 19th-century warrior hero.

About 500m west, **Izvorite Park** is filled with folkloric statues and the mysterious source of the Kamcha River (known locally as 'crazy river').

Hikes in the hills include the two-hour walk to ultra-gingerbread village **Zherevna**, and walks to waterfalls north of the nearby town **Medven**. Ask at the information centre.

## Courses

Bulgaria's famous **Philip Kotev School** (☎ 2215; smu\_k\_l@mail.bg; ul Georgi Zahariev 2) offers *gaida* and other traditional music classes in July and August. Occasionally you can catch students' recitals, particularly in April and May.

## Sleeping & Eating

**Starata Vodenitsa** (☎ 2360; r40lv) Near the entrance to Izvorite Park, this 'old mill' features seven dark-wood rooms decked richly in Bulgarian crafts, including locally made rugs. The rooms (with cable TV!) are some of the country's best deals, and the restaurant is one of Kotel's best.

## Getting There & Away

The decrepit **bus station** (☎ 2052) has regular services to Sliven (4lv to 5lv, 1½ hours), a lone bus to Shumen (5.50lv, 2½ hours) and a couple to Burgas (7lv). A couple of buses go to/from Zherevna and Medven daily.

## TROYAN & AROUND ТРОЯН

☎ 0670 / pop 22,460

Hilly Troyan's biggest claims to fame are its proximity to the Troyan Monastery and the Central Balkans National Park (with hiking paths and downhill skiing at Beklemeto). Several spa towns are in the mountains to the west, including Ribaritsa (with villas for rent).

About 1km south of Troyan's bus and train stations is a **tourist information centre** (☎ 60 964; www.troyan.bg; ul Vasil Levski 133; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri). Banks and internet access are found along ul Vasil Levski.

There are a couple of hotels, including the recently renovated, hilltop **Kâpina Hotel** (☎ 62 930; hotelkapina@abv.bg; r from €20), 800m south of the bus station (and just up to the right).

One of Bulgaria's most popular monasteries, 10km away, is the **Troyan Monastery** (admission

free; ☎ 6am–10pm) was established in the 1500s and is famed for Zahari Zograf's apocalyptic murals (painted in the 1840s) inside and outside the Church of the Holy Virgin. The small **museum** (admission 3lv; ☎ 8am–7pm) dedicated to Vasil Levski, who spent time during the rebellion here, is for fanatics only. Simple **rooms** (☎ 069-522 866; / per person 10–12lv) are available.

Troyan is reached by bus from Sofia, Pleven and Karlovo. About a dozen buses connect between town and the monastery on weekdays, and five a day at weekends (about 1lv, 20 minutes). A taxi to the monastery costs 5lv or so.

## VELIKO TÂRNOVO ВЕЛИКО ТЪРНОВО

☎ 062 / pop 66,200

Off the Bucharest–Istanbul track, on a sharp S-shaped gorge split by a snaking river and home to the best damn ruined citadel in the country, Veliko is not only good to look at but is also near hill towns, hill hikes, hill cycling and hill climbs, all of which make excellent day-trip fodder. A medieval capital of one of Bulgaria's past lives (1185–1393), Veliko is chiefly a lively student town these days, as one in six residents is a student.

March 22 is Veliko's (and a certain LP author's) birthday, when a big festival is staged around town.

## Orientation

Sloping ul Hristo Botev leads north from the Yug Bus Terminal to pl Maika Bulgaria, where ul Vasil Levski heads west and the main crawl, ul Nezavisimost, heads east for 1km. This street looms way over the gorge, with (slightly confusing) side streets and stairways weaving down to the water.

Note that signs pointing to attractions in town are often turned to point in the wrong direction. Damn kids.

## Information

The main streets winding through town have many foreign-exchange offices. Veliko earns a special place in our heart for having *several* laundry services, something foreign to much of Bulgaria.

**Main post office** (ul Nezavisimost) There is also a telephone centre.

**Navigator** (ul Nezavisimost 3; per hr 0.50–0.80lv; ☎ 24hr) Has 90 computers and offers international calls for 0.19lv per minute. There's a laundry service next door (open 8am to 9.30pm).

**Plino** (ul Baba Moto 10; per load about 3lv; ☎ 10am–6pm Mon–Fri, 10am–4pm Sat) Quick drop-off laundry service.

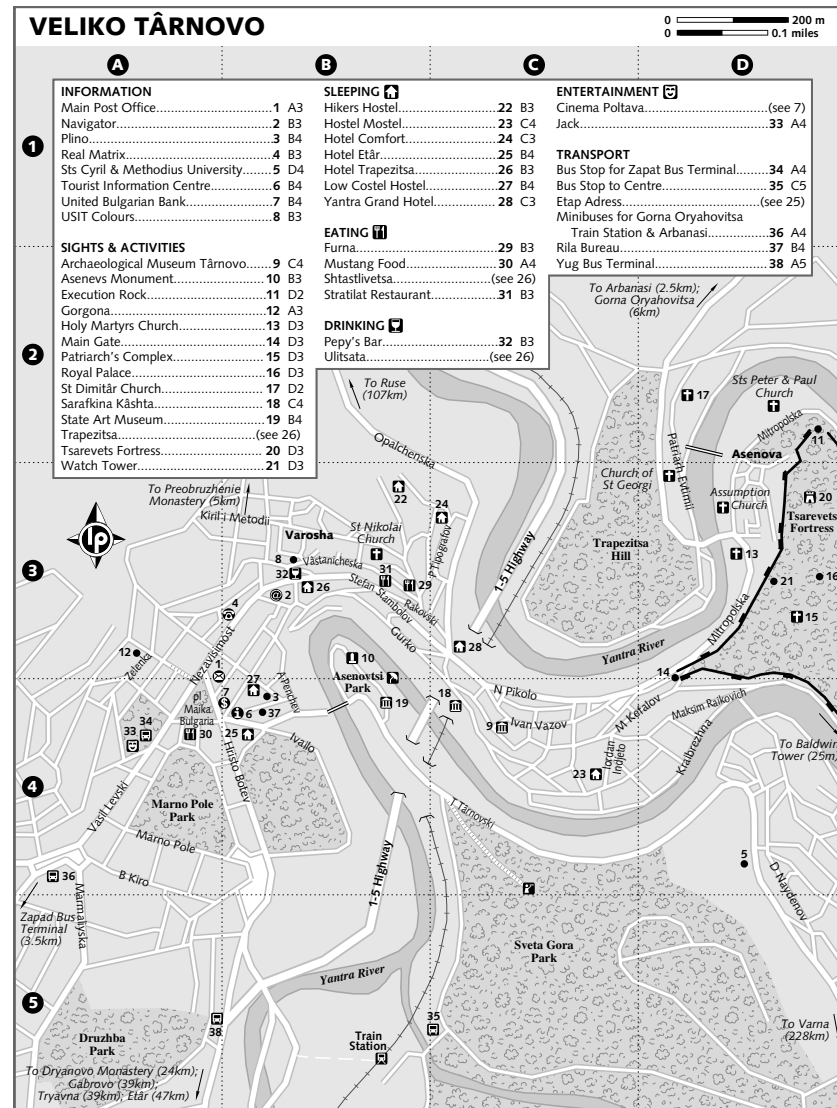
**Real Matrix** (ul Nezavisimost; international calls per min 0.25lv; ☎ 24hr) Telephone and internet services.

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 22 148; www.velikotarnovo.info; ul Hristo Botev; ☎ 9am–6pm Mon–Sat Apr–Oct, 9am–6pm Mon–Fri Nov–Mar) Remarkably helpful

centre with English-speaking staff who can arrange private accommodation, book rental cars for 30lv daily, sell regional maps (4lv) and offer tips on seeing the region.

**United Bulgarian Bank** (ul Hristo Botev; ☎ 8.30am–4.30pm Mon–Fri) Cashes travellers cheques, but its ATM is inside.

**USIT Colours** (☎ 601 751; pl Slaveikov 7; ☎ 9.30am–6.30pm Mon–Fri) Sells student cards for 10lv.





## Sights

English- and Bulgarian-language signs explain many historic sites, churches and houses around town, making for good DIY exploration. Be sure to walk along **ul Gurko**, Veliko's best-preserved street that cobbles its way along the gorge.

## TSAREVETS FORTRESS

About a kilometre from the centre, this mammoth **fortress** (admission 4lv; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Mar) sits stoically, sprawling on a site shared over the centuries by Thracians, Romans and Byzantines. What's seen now – a triangular, high-walled fortress with the remains of more than 400 houses and 18 churches – was largely built between the 5th and 12th centuries.

From the **main gate**, follow the left wall past a **watch tower** to the northern end where you can see **execution rock**, from where convicted souls were pushed. Back south, the giant Bulgarian flag flies from the ruined **Royal Palace**. Its high-up neighbour is the renovated **patriarch's complex**. Inside are surprisingly modern murals and a suspended altar. Back near the main gate, you can follow the south wall to **Baldwin Tower**.

The after-dark, 40-minute **sound and light show** (☎ 636 828; admission 12lv) takes place over the scene – once 30 tourists have paid. Ask at the gate if a show's on. Or, as one local said, 'When the tourists come and pay for the show, the whole town watches from outside for free.' Generally it's held every Saturday.

Buses 20, 400 and 110 make the trip between the centre and the site.

## MUSEUMS

**Sarafkina Kâshata** (☎ 635 802; ul Gurko 88; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Dec-Mar, 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri Apr-Nov) is a two-storey former banker's home from 1861 with a sitting room set up upstairs, including traditional objects and interesting photos that a matter-of-fact guide may point out ('It is rich women, it is 1910 scene, it is very rich man...').

The **Archaeological Museum Târnovo** (☎ 601 528; ul Ivan Vazov; admission 4lv; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-6pm Tue-Sun Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Tue-Sun Nov-Mar), just up the zigzag road from Sarafkina Kâshata, was closed for renovation at last pass. You can see Roman ruins laying amok outside, and the recently discovered tomb of King Kaloyan inside.

The **State Art Museum** (☎ 638 941; admission 3lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun, free Thu) has an interesting collection of (mostly) communist-era art. It's worth reaching (at least) for the spot outside: the huge 1985 **Asenevs Monument** (aka Four Bulgarian Kings Monument, for Assen, Petâr, Ivan Shishman and Kaloyan), which faces town from across the river.

## CHURCHES

Veliko is home to numerous churches, particularly in the old Asenova quarter (including the Byzantine-influenced **St Dimitâr Church**, Veliko's oldest), reached across a wood-plank pedestrian bridge from the fortress. Many churches, however, keep inconsistent hours and some charge about 4lv to enter. At research time, the riverside **Holy Martyrs Church** – where King Kaloyan's tomb was discovered in 2004 – was wrapping up a long renovation and planning to open as a museum. Call ☎ 638 841 for more information.

## Activities

**Trapezitza** (☎ 635 823; www.trapezitza1902.com; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri), which dates from 1902, arranges **rock-climbing** trips, sells a climbing guide (2lv), offers advice and can sometimes set up climbs on a huge indoor wall at the Palace of Culture and Sport, the site of international climbing competitions. Nearby climbs include St Trinity Monastery and Utetost (2km south). Check the website for information on week-long hut-to-hut hikes and bike trips.

**Gorgona** (☎ 601 400; www.gorgona-shop.com, in Bulgarian; ul Zelenka 2; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) rents out mountain bikes (10lv per day) and can point you to good trails. Head up the steps across ul Nezavisimost from the post office.

Ask at the tourist centre about **horse riding** and **hiking** in the area. One lovely hike goes 5km north on and up-and-down, two-hour hike to **Preobruzhnie Monastery**.

## Courses

**Sts Cyril & Methodius University** (☎ 639 869; www.cet-vtu.com; ul Teodosii Tarnovski 2) holds three-week Bulgarian language classes in August for €550 including lodging and meals. Private tutors cost 8lv or 9lv per hour.

## Sleeping

Touts offering abundant private rooms (around 15lv per person) usually await buses and trains at the stations.

## BUDGET

**Low Costel Hostel** (☎ 0885-726 733; lowcostel@hotmail.com; ul Assen Ruskov 6; dm incl breakfast 16-20lv; ☎) Nearly open at research time, this British-run hostel is closest to the stations – and the cheapest. It has a simple layout in a 1950s building, with three dorm rooms on one floor and a sitting area and kitchen upstairs. Laundry is 4lv.

**Hikers Hostel** (☎ 0889-691 661; www.hikers-hostel.org; ul Rezevoarska 91; dm/r incl breakfast €10/26; ☎) Up (way up) a cobbled path, this nice, smallish hostel is a hike to reach but has superb views – the upstairs terrace looks at the fortress' light show. Staff are friendly, though at times their friends can take over the common area. The two-tiered front deck sets up 'camp' spots at peak time; it's a bit busy for the two showers. Reserve ahead for (the crucial) pick-up from stations.

**Hostel Mostel** (☎ 0897-859 359; www.hostelmostel.com; ul Iordan Indjeto 10; dm incl breakfast from €10; ☎) Just getting set up at last pass, Sofia's Mostel folks were looking to take over Veliko's hostel scene with a big house three minutes from the fortress' entrance. Pluses include a barbecue area, huge balcony, big sitting area inside and – get ready – a stone-walled 'wine cellar' downstairs. Three dorm rooms and three private ones.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Trapezitza** (☎ 635 823; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; dm 15-20lv, s/d/apt 30/40/55lv) This central, cheap hotel has 30 rooms. It's slightly old (eg manifesto-brown carpet) but attracts youthful guests. Make sure you have a room at the back; they have ridiculously great gorge views. The two apartments (only) have TVs plus small balconies.

**Hotel Etâr** (☎ 621 838; www.etar.veliko.info; ul Ivailo 2; s/d incl breakfast 40/60lv, with air con 60/80lv; ☎) This old commie-era tower hotel has clean but stuffy rooms (about 80 in all); higher ones have fortress views.

**Hotel Comfort** (☎ 628 728; ul P Tipografov 5; s/d 55/65lv; ☎) Many of the Comfort's dozen rooms have full-frontal views of the fortress and the light show – a few have balconies. Some private bathrooms are across the hall.

## TOP END

**Yantra Grand Hotel** (☎ 958 2843; www.yantrabg.com; pl Velchovazavera; s/d incl breakfast from 90/120lv; ☎ ☎ ☎) Off Veliko's main strip, this new 71-room, eight-floor hotel has big rooms with earthy tones and a health club with a small pool. Half the rooms look over the fortress (definitely sleeping for the view: it's an extra 13lv).

## Eating

**Furna** (Samovodska Charshiya; banitsa 0.60lv; ☎ 7am-5pm) A fresh bakery on the site of the old market.

**Stratilat Restaurant** (ul Rakovski 11; sandwiches & pizza from 1.60lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) Named 'the lucky one', perhaps because it's hard to get a seat at the outside tables. Most popular for cakes (1.90lv to 3lv), coffee and drinks.

**Mustang Food** (ul Maika Bulgaria; mains 2-5lv; ☎ 24hr) For a lapse into the West, this Americanised diner serves a full breakfast of eggs, bacon, hash browns and toast all day.

**Shtastlivetsa** (☎ 600 656; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; mains 5-11lv; ☎ 10am-11pm) If you're into detail, allow an hour to look over the two giant menus (for Bulgarian or Italian food) in the two-storey spot that's long been Veliko's most popular (and best) eating place. There are nine 'diet pizzas' made of rye flour and 20lv family-sized 'Gypsy' meals, plus 82 salads including the tasty carrot-and-apple salad with honey (2.60lv).

## Drinking

**Pepy's Bar** (ul Veneta Boteva 5; ☎ 8am-11pm) A laid-back, softly lit bar with mixed ages, a grab-bag décor (Jackie O photos, Bulgarian 78s) and an emphasis on chatting, not loud music.

**Ulitsata** (ul Stefan Stambolov 79; draft beer 0.80lv; ☎ 7am-late) A local *birraria* with a couple of seats facing the gorge and some metal on the stereo.

**Jack** (ul Magistralna 5; beer 1.50lv; ☎ 9am-2 or 3am) As in Daniels, Jack blares dance music when bands aren't splaying on this (sometimes) student-filled 2nd-floor club with big leather sofas.

## Entertainment

**Cinema Poltava** (☎ 620 542; tickets 2-4lv; ul Nezavisimost 3) Plays foreign movies with Bulgarian subtitles.

## Getting There & Away BUS

Private buses leave from the **Yug Bus Terminal** (ul Hristo Botev), a 15-minute walk downhill from the centre. Hourly (if not more frequent) buses en route to Sofia (9lv to 13lv, three hours) and Varna (9lv to 13lv, three hours) stop here and at the more convenient location of **Etap Adress** (☎ 630 564; Hotel Etâr). Yug also sends buses to Istanbul (30lv).

The quiet, public **Zapad Bus Terminal** (☎ 640 908), 4km west of the centre, sends eight buses daily to Ruse (6lv, two hours), three to Plovdiv (12lv, four hours), four to Kazanlak (6lv, two hours) and four to Burgas (12lv, four hours), and a couple of buses weekly to Troyan (7lv,

two hours). There are also buses to nearby Elena and Gabrovo. Bus 10, among others, heads west to the terminal from ul Vasil Levski.

#### CAR

The tourist information centre can arrange rental cars for 30lv per day.

#### TRAIN

Veliko's small **train station** (☎ 620 065) sends about six trains a day to Ruse (4.30lv, 2½ to 3½ hours) and eight to Tryavna (2.90lv, one hour). A much busier station is just 8.5km north at Gorna Oryahovitsa, a stop on the Sofia–Varna line. Two trains from there go to Bucharest (seat/sleeper 25/41lv) and there's a daily train to Istanbul (35/62lv). Minibuses along ul Vasil Levski, or bus 10 east from the centre, head there every 10 or 15 minutes (1lv).

There's a walkway from the train platform (away from station) that connects to an underpass leading to ul Hristo Botev, near the bus station. Catch bus 4, 5, 13, 30 or 70 heading south from outside the station to reach the centre.

Buy international tickets at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 622 2042; ul Tsar Kolyan; ☎ 8am–noon & 1–4.30pm Mon–Fri), in the alley behind the information centre.

### AROUND VELIKO TÂRNOVO

Much of the following can be seen in a day if you have (motorised) wheels. Contact Trapezitsa (p164) for a week-long guided hike from Veliko to the historic hill town of **Elena**.

#### Arbanasi Арбанаси

☎ 062 / pop 1500

Five kilometres from Veliko Târnovo, high-on-a-hill Arbanasi is a collection of spread-out old walled churches and villas, some of which serve as classy *mekhanas* or hotels. It can feel a bit exclusive, with walled villas and upmarket restaurants (some run, it's whispered, by mafia). The town never was a real town, but rather served as quarters for much of the king's royal entourage. Still, many a blissful beer-soaked afternoon has been spent watching Veliko turn gold, pink or purple in the setting sun.

Worth getting lost to find, the 16th-century **Nativity Church** (☎ 604 323; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 9am–6pm Apr–Oct, 9am–5pm Nov–Mar), 200m west of the bus stop, is a shock to enter. It was built ho-hum and low to obscure the building's purpose from the Ottomans. Inside, it bursts with colourful, ceiling-to-floor murals depicting 2000 scenes, including the evocative 'wheel of life'.

**Panorama** (☎ 623 421; d 35lv; P) is a friendly, simple, daringly nontraditional hillside hotel, about 400m west of the bus stop (towards the end of the road). It has a few rooms and is expanding. Its outdoor café serves hilariously large ice-cream portions.

A more traditional budget option is **Falkite** (The Torches; ☎ 604 496; s/d 16/32lv), about 150m northwest from the bus stop.

It's about 3lv or 4lv to reach Arbanasi by taxi from Veliko. Some Gorna Oryahovitsa-bound minibuses from ul Vasil Levski in Veliko stop in Arbanasi (all come within a 700m walk of the centre). Nine minibuses ply the journey daily (0.50lv).

#### Dryanovo Monastery

Дряновски Манастир

Top-heavy cliffs stoop over this charming stream-side **monastery** (☎ 0676-2389; admission free; ☎ 7am–10pm), 24km south of Veliko. Built in the 12th century, the monastery's been destroyed a time or two, and was last rebuilt in the early 18th century. The priest here is quite chatty.

It's possible to stay in the simple rooms (9lv to 15lv per person with shared bathroom). There are bungalows and a small hotel nearby, and along the river a leafy open-air *mekhana* serving Bulgarian food. Gabrovo-bound buses will stop at the turn-off (if requested), about 5km south of the town Dryanovo, where it's a 1.5km walk to the monastery.

#### Etâr Етър

Played up by travel agents and tour operators, **Etâr Ethnographic Village Museum** (☎ 066-801 838; www.etar.hit.bg; adult/student 4/1lv; ☎ 8.30am–6pm May–Sep, 9am–4.30pm Oct–Apr) is an open-air museum with shops and workshops recreating Bulgaria's revival period of the 19th century. A nice 3km-walk uphill is the pleasant **Sokolski Monastery**.

**Hotel Perla** (☎ 066-801 984; r 38lv) – just before the Etâr gate – has six huge, very inviting rooms.

To get here by public transport, take a bus to the large town of Gabrovo, 8km north of Etâr, and take blue-and-white city bus 8 to the gate, or bus 1 or 7 to near Hotel Perla; buses run every half hour. A taxi to Gabrovo from Etâr is about 5lv.

#### Tryavna Трявна

☎ 0677 / pop 10,500

As Bulgaria's woodcarving capital – with an old town centre and revival-era shopfronts – Tryavna is an Arbanasi without the tourists

or an Etâr without the ticket price. It's good for a day visit, but it's even more evocative when the whitewashed buildings glow under moonlight and the locals' laughter pours out of small *mekhanas*.

#### ORIENTATION & INFORMATION

Tryavna is 39km south of Veliko. Its bus and train stations are opposite each other on the north side of town. Follow ul Angel Kanchev (just east of the stations), or the road along the tracks, 400m south (over the creek) to the centre.

The **tourist office** (☎ 2247; www.tryavna.bg; ul Angel Kanchev 22; ☎ 9am–noon & 2–5pm Mon–Fri), next to the post office, was closed for renovation at last pass. In the past it's offered help on local hikes and even rented camping equipment. There's an ATM next door.

#### SIGHTS

Tryavna has about a dozen museums and churches. All museums are allegedly open 9am to 6pm daily April to October (8am to 5pm other times); admission is 2/1lv for adults/students.

West of the tourist office is **Shkolo** (☎ 2278), a school-turned-art museum with 500 regional artists' works. Across the street is **St Archangel Michael Church** (admission 1lv), with a two-storey collection of icons.

Over the arched bridge to ul Slaveikov, you will pass several workshops with artisans chipping away at wood blocks. Around 150m further is the **Daskalov House** (1808; ul Slaveikov 27), Bulgaria's lone woodcarving museum.

#### SLEEPING & EATING

**Trevnenski Kât** (☎ 2033; ul Kanchev 8; s/d from 30/40lv) It's simple, but the best place to stay – a classic 19th-century tavern-style guesthouse on the main square with a buzzing *mekhana* downstairs. It fills on weekends.

**Zograf** (☎ 4970; zograf@mbox.digsys.bg; ul Slaveikov 1; s/d 32/46lv) Has rooms next to the old bridge, with a huge courtyard restaurant.

**Starata Loza** (ul Slaveikov 44; mains 2.80–7.50lv; ☎ 8am–midnight) Across from the Daskalov House, Starata Loza serves tasty Bulgarian fare.

#### GETTING THERE & AWAY

Tryavna has half-hourly bus connections with Gabrovo (13km east), but nowhere else. Nine trains a day go to/from Veliko Târnovo (2.90lv, one hour).

#### Shipka Pass Шипченски проход

The scene of an important Russian–Turkish battle in 1877, Shipka Pass (about 60km south of Veliko) is accented by the bare-top, 1326m-high Mt Stoletov and the six-storey **Freedom Monument** (admission 2lv; ☎ 9am–5pm summer, 9am–5pm Sat & Sun winter) with displays on the battles and, up top, 360-degree views of the Stara Planina and Valley of Roses below (hey kids, it's Kazanlak!).

It's a Shipka tradition to finish a visit with **buffalo yoghurt** (birosko mlyako; cups 1.3lv) at the stands below.

Hourly buses between Kazanlak and Gabrovo will drop you off at the pass, where you can hail the next bus. Shipka town is 13km to the south.

### SHUMEN ШУМЕН

☎ 054 / pop 86,800

Set along a long sweeping mountain halfway between Varna and Ruse, Shumen lacks the quaint cobbled-lane punch of some historical towns, but its neighbours (forts, monuments and ancient capitals) and Shumensko beer make it an appealing stop-off. Its historic core is tied to Bulgaria's beginnings in the sweet 7th century.

The name Shumen may be from a word for 'leaves', or a version of Tsar Simeon's name – it doesn't mean the town is full of male cobblers.

#### Orientation & Information

The main square, pl Osvobozhdenie, is about 1km west of the neighbouring bus and train stations on bul Slavyanski. About halfway between them is a **Bulbank** (bul Slavyanski; ☎ 8.45am–5.40pm Mon–Fri) with an ATM. Across from the post office and Hotel Madara on pl Osvobozhdenie is the **International Call Centre** (bul Slavyanski; ☎ 8am–11pm), with internet access (1.20lv per hr) and calls abroad for 0.20lv per minute. In the city office building is a **tourist information centre** (☎ 853 773; bul Slavyanski 17; ☎ 8.30am–5pm Mon–Fri).

#### Sights

From afar it's an enigmatic slab of grey over-looking town, but up close the super **Creators of the Bulgarian State Monument** (admission 2lv; ☎ 24hr) welcomes those who climb the 1300m up the obvious steps from the centre (or cheat and take a taxi) with incredible cubist-style horse-back figures peering down from between crevices like stone Don Quixotes. The monument

was built in 1981 to commemorate Bulgaria's 1300th birthday. Those into communist-era statements shouldn't miss it; you can sometimes get in for half price or even free.

On a hilltop 6km west of the centre, the **Shumen Fortress** (admission 3lv; ☎ approx 8am-5pm) is a spread-out site dating from the early Iron Age. Thracians, Romans and Byzantines have left their mark as well. A taxi to the fortress is about 3lv or 4lv. It's possible to walk between the monument and fort, but the path isn't always clear.

Everything in the impressive 18th-century (and still active) **Tombul Mosque** (ul Doiran; admission 2lv; ☎ 9am-6pm), 500m southwest of pl Osvozhdenie, is original – much of the paint has been atmospherically lost to the ages.

## Sleeping

The information centre *may* be able to find private accommodation.

**Hotel Madara** (☎ 57451; pl Osvozhdenie; s/d 34/48lv) is an OK ex-Balkantourist hotel that divvies its space between rooms and local businesses.

**Zamáka** (☎ 800 049; www.zamak-bg.com; ul Vasil Levski 17; s/d/apt 35/55/85lv; ☎) Definitely the best deal in town, the 12-room hotel (100m west of Hotel Madara) has a good restaurant downstairs and a courtyard in the back.

**Hotel Pazara** (aka Stivest; ☎ 292 756; ul Maritsa 15; r 40lv) A bit out of the centre, this 13-room, simple hotel is four blocks north of the start of the pedestrian mall.

## Eating

Zamáka's restaurant is super. On the pedestrian mall, **Pizzeria Elit** (bul Slavjanski; pizza about 2lv) is a funny half-basement bar, half-teen pool hall with good pizza in a smoky room that looks like it's from 1984.

## Getting There & Away

Numerous buses en route to Sofia (20lv, five hours) and Varna (5lv, 1½ hours) stop in Shumen. Also, at least six buses daily go to Ruse (6lv, 2½ hours) and Veliko Târnovo (6lv, two hours).

Around nine or 10 daily trains leave for Varna (4.90lv, two hours) and Ruse (4.90lv, two hours), five for Sofia (15lv, 6½ hours) and one to Plovdiv (13.70lv, six hours).

## MADARA МАДАРА

Home to the cute horseman that brands all of Bulgaria's stotinki coins, the superb

**Madara National Historical & Archaeological Reserve** (☎ 05313-2095; admission 4lv; ☎ 8am-6.30pm summer, 8am-5pm winter), 16km east of Shumen, is a lovely area with a mountain-top fort, open-air cave wall, intriguing rock chapel and, most importantly, the horseman – a bas-relief carved in a viva-Bulgaria fever onto the 100m cliff-side in the 8th century. The reserve is a 2km uphill walk from the village (the sign read 'Madara Konnik'). At research time **NBDN** (☎ 800 629; www.travelbg.org; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 130, Shumen) was setting up hang-gliding trips from Madara.

About 100m before the entrance are some cosy cabins and a sign pointing to a camping-bungalow area. The cabins are at **Motel Magarski** (☎ 05313-2063; motel\_magarskikonnik@abv.bg; r/apt 30/40lv).

Some Varna-bound trains stop in Madara, but no buses make the trip. A taxi from Shumen is 15lv or 20lv one way.

## RUSE PYCE

☎ 082 / pop 158,200

Chipper for a border town, with leafy streets and a buzzing central square, Ruse (aka Rousse) isn't a bad introduction or 'so long' to Bulgaria for travellers heading between Bulgaria and Romania, across the Danube. Attractions often sit behind locked doors, but Ruse (Roo-say) is definitely the busiest Danube town in Bulgaria (or Romania), and nearby Rusenski Lom Nature Park provides appealing overnight or day-trip rural adventures.

Ruse's **March Days Music Festival** is held in the last two weeks of March.

## Orientation

From the bus and train station, ul Borisova leads 2km north to the central pl Svoboda, from where the busy pedestrian mall ul Aleksandrovska extends northeast and southwest. The Danube is several blocks further north from pl Svoboda.

## Information

**Bulbank** (pl Sveta Troitsa; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm) Just southeast of pl Svoboda (next to the red opera house); 24-hour ATM.

**Central post office** (pl Svoboda)

**Interphone** (☎ 440 368; ul Vidin 35; per hr 0.40lv; ☎ 24hr) Internet access, a couple blocks north of pl Svoboda. Calls overseas cost about 0.40lv per min.

**Left Luggage** (train station; per day 2lv; ☎ 24hr)

**Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 824 704; ul Aleksandrovska; ☎ 9.30am-12.30pm & 1-6pm Mon-Fri) Stocks

brochures and finds private accommodation. Just northeast of pl Svoboda.

**Telephone centre** (ul Panov 14; international calls per min 0.40lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) A block south of pl Svoboda, to the left as you enter the pedestrian mall from the south.

## Sights

Ruse's attractions seem to find a way to be closed when we're in town. The best thing to do is walk. Head from central pl Svoboda along the pedestrian mall, ul Aleksandrovska, about 400m northeast to the largely untouched **Soviet Army Monument**, at the start of the **Youth Park**, which is filled with open-air cafés and 1.50lv rides (in good weather).

Much of Ruse seems to turn its back to the Danube (or Romania), but there is a **promenade** that gets views of both, and you can access the shore at various points. There are many lovely historic buildings to wander around too. The river is about five blocks northwest of pl Svoboda.

Facing the grey hulk of the communist-era Riga Hotel is the (sometimes open, we hear) **Museum of the Urban Lifestyle in Ruse** (☎ 820 997; ul Tsar Ferdinand 39; adult/student 4/1lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Sat), a revival-era home filled with period crafts and furniture.

About halfway between the train station and centre is the small **Rousse Art Gallery** (☎ 221 494; ul Borisova 39; admission 0.50lv; ☎ 9am-1pm & 2-6pm Tue-Sun), a scruffy, modern space with edgier exhibits than in most Bulgarian art museums, and – hey – it's open at weekends.

About 200m east of pl Svoboda, via ul Petko, the gold-domed **Pantheon of the National Revival** (ul Tsar Osvoboditel), dedicated to those who fought the Ottomans in 1878, is usually closed. Just outside is **Paniot Ivanov Kitov's tomb**. He was apparently a remarkably moustached man.

## Sleeping

The office of **Dunav Tours** (☎ 825 048; dtbktu@dunavtours.bg; pl Khan Kubrat 5; s/d €8/15; ☎ 9am-5.30pm Mon-Fri), two blocks southwest of pl Svoboda, can book private rooms.

**Hotel Ruse** (☎ 823 255; ul Borisova 69; s/d 26/32lv; ☎) It's tacky as a Vegas knock-off, but this 10-room job is Ruse's best-deal budget hotel. It has thin walls, TVs and some balconies. It's midway between the train station and the centre. Hopefully prices won't rise.

**Evropa Hotel** (☎ 875 599; autogara; s/d 72/84lv; ☎) The 20 new rooms are perfumed, garish and

overpriced but convenient and clean. It's attached to the bus station.

**Anna Palace** (☎ 825 005; www.annapalace.com; ul Kniajeska 4; s incl breakfast 88-108lv, d 117-137lv; ☎) This back-street splurge has high-ceilinged, stylish rooms in a 25-room makeover of an historic building near the river. It's several blocks west of the centre.

## Eating

There are plenty of open-air cafés and snacks to find on ul Aleksandrovska. For groceries, head northwest on ul Aleksandrovska 200m from pl Svoboda to **Gradski Hali** (ul Aleksandrovska 93; ☎ 8am-10pm). Just behind it to the north is residential street ul Omurtag, which leads four blocks to a couple of open-air restaurants with river views. A good one is **Chineshla** (☎ 826 682; bul Prdumuski 50; mains 5-10lv; ☎ 11am-11pm), serving 'all kinds of food' (meaning Bulgarian grills and salads).

**Chiplika** (☎ 828 222; ul Aleksandrovska 1; mains 4-10lv; ☎ 11am-2am) Ruse's top Bulgarian restaurant has richly traditional rooms and a stone-floor mezzanine for tasty local fare in a buzzing spot. Follow ul Aleksandrovska southwest from pl Svoboda and turn left on ul Otets Paicii (near a small square).

## Getting There & Away

Ruse's **Yug Bus Terminal** (ul Pristanishtna) has frequent daily buses heading to Sofia (12lv to 14lv, five hours) and Veliko Târnovo (5lv to 7lv, two hours). There are also a few buses to Varna (10lv, 3½ hours) and one daily bus to Plovdiv (15lv, 2½ hours). A couple of companies send buses to Istanbul (30lv, 13 hours); **Ozbatu** (☎ 874 777) is one. There are four minibuses going daily to Bucharest (€14); call ☎ 821 964 for information on these.

Three daily buses to Cherven and Ivanovo in Rusenski Lom Nature Park leave from **Iztok Bus Terminal** (☎ 845 064), 4.5km east of the centre. City buses 2 and 13 go there from ul Skobelev, near the roundabout four blocks east of ul Borisova.

The **train station** (☎ 820 222), next to Yug, has three daily trains to Sofia (14.70lv, seven hours), four to Veliko Târnovo (5.50lv, 2½ to 3½ hours), two to Varna (8.90lv, four hours) and three to Bucharest (15lv, three hours), which spend half the duration stopped for border checks. In the station, **Rila Bureau** (☎ 828 016; ☎ 9-noon & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) sells international train tickets.

## RUSENSKI LOM NATURE PARK ПРИРОДЕН ПАРК РУСЕНСКИ ЛОМ

Starting just southwest of Ruse, this 32.6-sq-km park is home to winding rivers, other-era villages wedged between cliffs, hiking paths, rock-climbing sites, and cave and rock monasteries. In summer nearly 200 bird species flock here.

It's best to access the western part of the park – with the town of Ivanovo and the more appealing Koshov and Cherven. Another, Nisovo, is further east. Before setting out, drop by the **Rusenski Lom Nature Park Office** (☎ 872 397; www.lomea.org; ul Gen Skobelev 7; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri) in Ruse. Helpful staff can point out camping grounds and where to hike along the river, and sell maps (3lv). Look for the official sign and walk in (enter from ul Tinka Dzhein).

The **Ivanovo Rock Monastery** (admission 3lv; ☎ 9am–noon & 1–6pm Tue–Sun) is 4km east of Ivanovo: a centuries-old sanctuary cut into cliffs with colourful, remarkably well-preserved murals from the 14th century. Opening hours seem iffy adhered to. For a guide – and some certainty that it's open – contact the so-called **History Museum** (☎ 925 006; pl Battemberg) in Ruse.

In Cherven, the spread-out remains of the 6th-century **citadel** (admission 3lv when attendant is present, free otherwise) sit atop a cliff at a sharp bend in the river.

Rooms in traditional homes are available in Cherven and Koshov if you ask around.

Buses from Ruse's Iztok bus terminal go a few times a day to Cherven via Ivanovo and Koshov. It's feasible to enter at one town and hike to the next – ask (and get a map) at the Ruse park office.

## BLACK SEA COAST

For many travellers, the blue-green water and golden beaches along the Black Sea coast are Bulgaria. The gateway towns – beach-clubbing Varna and grittier Burgas – and resortburgs Sunny Beach, Golden Sands and Albena sizzle with bodies in summer. Also popular are cobbled Sozopol and Nesebăr: inviting seaside towns with long histories. Stretches south of Varna with locals, but have some of the most tempting options.

Most hotels raise their rates in June and again in July and August, then drop them back a bit in September. At many other times

of year, as one local said, 'It's just you and the dogs.'

Before taking a splash, take a moment to reflect on this body of water, which is landlocked and long a treasure for a grab-bag of non-Western peoples (Muslims, Roma and communists). It's changing though. From afar, formerly quiet Sunny Beach now looks like a city, and its neighbours are being subjected to (seemingly) unplanned development of side-by-side hotels surrounded by dirt paths and makeshift fences that catch debris in the wind. You wonder if the Black Sea, in parts at least, is slowly dying.

## VARNA BAPHA

☎ 052 / pop 312,000

Even without the Black Sea at its lip, Varna would be a Bulgarian highlight. Big for Bulgaria, it has one of the country's most rewarding museums, heaps of exposed Roman-wall ruins and, of course, the water. From Varna, there are easy pops north and south to beaches, and the town beaches aren't bad either. If you're looking for Black Sea nightlife, Varna's beach lights up with open-air clubs all summer – it's definitely *the* party place on the beach.

Varna was briefly called 'Stalin' after WWII. Long before, Thracians lived in the area from 4000 BC, and Greek sailors re-founded it as Odessos in the sixth century BC. You still see plenty of sailor outfits about these days, too.

## Information

Find entertainment listings in the free weekly Bulgarian-language *Programata* and the annual English-language *Varna Guide*.

**Bulbank** (ul Slivnitsa; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Frag** (pl Nezavisimost; per hr 1lv; ☎ 24hr) Get online down the spiral stairs from a back door of the Dramatic Theatre building; it has beer and 59 computers.

**Global Tours** (☎ 601 085; www.globaltours-bg.com; ul Kynaz Boris I 67; ☎ 8am–10pm Jun–Sep, 9am–7pm Mon–Fri Oct–May) Excellent travel agency books cars (from €16 per day) and private accommodation (from €20) and offers guided day trips to Balchik and Kaliakra Cape for €17.

**International Phone Booths** (ul Batenberg 44; long-distance calls per min 0.23lv; ☎ 9am–10pm)

**Left Luggage** (main bus terminal; bul Vladislav Varenchik; per day 4lv; ☎ 7am–10pm)

**Main post office** (ul Săborna 36)

**Municipal Tourist Information Centre** (ul Batenberg; ☎ approx 10am–6pm Mon–Fri)

**Peralnya** (ul Voden; per load 4.60lv; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat) Drop-off laundry service.

INFORMATION		EATING	
Bulbank.....	1 C2	Happy.....	23 B3
Frag.....	2 B2	La Pastaria.....	24 B1
Global Tours.....	3 D1	Mr Baba.....	25 C4
International Phone Booths.....	4 B2	Orient Turkish Restaurant.....	26 B3
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Municipal Tourist Information Centre.....	6 B2	Vinagi Topli Zakuska.....	28 B3
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Pinginivite.....	8 C2	Cherno More Hotel.....	15 C2
<b>SIGHTS &amp; ACTIVITIES</b>		Flag Varna.....	16 B2
Archaeological Museum.....	9 B1	Hotel Relax 1 & 2.....	17 C2
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<b>ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSEUM</b>		Three Dolphins Hotel.....	19 B3
Ethnographic Museum.....	11 B3	Train Station Accommodation Bureau.....	20 B4
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Roman Thermae.....	14 C3	<b>ENTERTAINMENT</b>	
<b>SLEEPING</b>		Dramatic Theatre.....	29 B2
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Hotel Relax 1 & 2.....	17 C2	<b>TRANSPORT</b>	
Panorama Hotel.....	18 C4	Etap.....	(see 15)
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Train Station Accommodation Bureau.....	20 B4	Rila Bureau.....	33 B3
Victoria.....	21 B3	<b>TOURIST INFORMATION CENTRE</b>	
Voennomorski Club.....	22 A2	Centre.....	6 B2

**Pinginivite** (ul 27 Juli 13; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 10am–6pm Sat & Sun) This bookshop stocks maps and some English-language titles.

**Regional Tourist Information Centre** (☎ 602 907; tourism@tourexpo.bg; bul Tsar Osoboditel 36; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat) Helpful English-speaking staff can arrange car rental (from €25 per day) and apartments (from 50lv) and help with trips around the Black Sea coast.

**Sea Shadow** (☎ 0887-364 711; www.guide-bg.com)

One-man operation of Patrick Perev, who leads various trips up and down the coast; a day at Kaliakra Cape and Balchik costs €18 per person (with three going).

## Dangers & Annoyances

Nothing to panic about, but Varna has one of the worst reputations for rip-offs in

Bulgaria. Kids in packs sometimes storm tourists around the open-air market and the Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin. Some readers have reported lost bags and wallets when departing minibuses from Golden Sands at the microbus terminal. Taxis in Varna commonly overcharge: one Brit we met paid 60lv for the 8km ride from the airport! To be safe, call one of the companies listed on p174.

## Sights

### ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

Housed in a grand old two-storey building (a former girls' school), this large museum (☎ 681 030; ul Maria Luisa 41; adult/student 5/2lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Oct-Mar) is up for Bulgaria's best. It's filled with more than 100,000 pieces from some 6000 years of local history, all remarkably well explained in English. No place better helps contextualise the waves of change this fine land has faced.

In the first room, a wall display posts finds of chronological periods (Stone Age, Bronze Age, Roman, Ottoman etc) to show how art evolved. Don't miss the sculpted goatee on the 3rd millennium BC Thracian tomb. More serious highlights are the gold and copper pieces from the Varna Eneolithic Necropolis, dating from 4500 BC and excavated in the 1970s.

### PRIMORSKI PARK & THE BEACH

Stretching for 8km, **Primorski Park** claims to be Europe's largest seaside park, and is a popular strolling ground for locals. It's freckled with museums, a kiddie ride park, heroic statues and numerous popcorn vendors.

At its southern end, the outside ships, planes and canyons of the **National Navy Museum** (bul Primorski 2; adult/student 4/1lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Fri) can be easily viewed over the gate. (Sample cannon graffiti: 'chaos punx!') To the north, a 1km shaded promenade leads to the **Liberators Monument**. There's also a monument for the 10,000 British soldiers who died here during the Crimean War.

To the south of the park are pockets of fairly good **beaches** in and to the north of Primorski Park, as there are up north (just east of the Liberators Monument), plus the peak of Varna's club action.

## OTHER SIGHTS

Wedgeed impossibly between the St Anatasios Orthodox Church and more modern apartment buildings, the leftovers of the 2nd

century AD **Roman Thermae** (ul Khan Krum & ul San Stefano; adult/student 3/2lv; ☎ 10am-5pm May-Oct, 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Nov-Apr) comprise the largest ruins in Bulgaria. Frankly, there's not much to see inside that you can't see from outside.

Inside the greatest of Varna's churches, the onion-domed **Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin** (pl Mitropolitska Simeon; admission free; ☎ 7.30am-7pm summer, 7.30am-5.30pm winter), you'll hear the crackle of offering candles in a massive room of colourful murals and stained glass with a dark-wood altar.

Varna's second-best museum, housed in an 1860 revival building, is the **Ethnographic Museum** (☎ 630 588; ul Panagyurishte 22; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Tue-Sun Apr-Sep, 10am-5pm Tue-Sat Oct-Mar), a complex of traditional buildings on a rising pedestrian alley. On show are examples of local dress nicely arranged by region and healthy servings of old tools.

## Festivals & Events

You're likely to witness something of the renowned **Varna Summer International Festival**, which dates from 1926 and features all sorts of music between May and October.

## Sleeping

Those without plush budgets (or package trips) generally stay in one of the hostels or arrange great-value private accommodation, which knows no bounds from June through September.

## BUDGET

**Gregory's Backpackers** (☎ 379 909; www.hostelvarna.com; 82 Fenix St, Zvezditsa; dm incl breakfast €10; ☎ ) Run by a young British couple, Gregory's is the best kick-back hostel base the Black Sea offers. It's in a small village 15 minutes from Varna's discos; staff offer one daily drop-off and pick-up ride; or bus 36 makes its way hourly. The TV room with sofas and beanbags gets busy with its DVD catalogue and the bar, plus there's a small wading pool outside. Open April to October only.

**Flag Hostel** (☎ 089 656 4679; flagvarna@yahoo.com; 2nd fl, ul Sheinovo 2; dm/r incl breakfast €8/25) The first Flag was traded for a yacht in 2006, but a Brit grabbed the reins at this location, which opened after our last pass through town. Its central location is good for the disco-oriented.

**Victorina** (☎ 603 541; http://victorina.borsabg.com; Tsar Simeon 36; s/d with family 22/30lv, s/d in private apt 30/40lv; ☎ 7am-9pm Jun-Sep, 10am-6pm Mon-Fri Oct-May)

Working all year (bless their hearts), this window bureau helps find private apartments or rooms with families around Varna. They 'always have a room'. From the station, exit and go through the underpass.

Campers can venture about 20km south of Varna at the delta of the Kamchea River to **Kamchea**, a protected area of mangroves and sandy beach. Locals love it, there are bungalows to rent (from 10lv per person) and endless spots to pitch tents. A sign points the way, 3km from the highway.

Other agencies that can help with homestays:

**Global Tours** (☎ 601 085; www.globaltours-bg.com; ul Kynaz Boris I 67; ☎ 8am-10pm Jun-Sep, 9am-7pm Mon-Fri Oct-May)

**Main Bus Terminal Accommodation Bureau** (☎ 505 747; www.accommodatebg.com; s/d with family from 15/25lv, s/d with private apt from 24/30lv)

**Train Station Accommodation Bureau** (☎ 602 318) Some travellers have reported an extra '25% charge'.

## MIDRANGE

**Hotel Relax 1 & 2** (s/d 35/40lv; ☎ ) No 1 (☎ 607 847; www.hotelrelax1.com); No 2 (☎ 361 586; ul Stefan Karadzha 22) This odd-ball complex of two Relaxes is a good, cheap beat. No 1, in the back, has more modern and smaller rooms, looking like a 2001 interpretation of 1976 Novosibirsk. No 2, in a century-old house, has four mix-and-match rooms with the hilarious addition of a 130-year-old piano in one.

**Voenomorski Club** (☎ 617 965; vmkvarna@varna.net; ul Vladislav Varenchik 2; s/d 31/46lv; ☎ ) Filling the top two floors of the sky-blue building, rooms at the 'BNK' can be a little musty and the staff grumpy. Rooms are set around a great unintentionally retro TV lounge. Staff devoutly guarded summer prices, so expect the leva count to be higher than posted here.

**Cherno More Hotel** (☎ 612 243; www.chernomorebg.com; bul Slivnitsa 33; s/d from 35/40lv, with air con from 50lv; ☎ ) It gets mocked, and no doubt this Balkan tourist beaut, rising like a Karl Marx beacon, has seen its best days. But it's smack-bang in the centre, and a minimal renovation (new carpets, some furnishings) has helped soften (or hide) the smudges. All rooms have balconies with superb ocean views. Ask for the '02' line for corner views.

**Three Dolphins Hotel** (☎ 600 911; three\_dolphins@abv.bg; ul Gabrovo 27; s incl breakfast 42-51lv, d 50-60lv; ☎ ) Most of the 10 rooms at this friendly hotel, on a leafy side street near the train

station, spout off a recent, highly successful renovation that reflects the owners' love of keeping things interesting. The 'retro' room goes all-out Victorian, while the nautical-blue 'dolphin' features translucent dolphin toilet seats. Rates rise 10% in summer.

## TOP END

**Panorama Hotel** (☎ 687 300; www.panoramabg.com; bul Primorski 31; s/d incl breakfast 128/164lv; ☎ ) For the swank set, this 57-room hotel – right across from the pier road and the start of Varna's beach – has Varna's nicest rooms for the best (relative) price. Rooms have internet connection, and there's a fitness centre.

## Eating

In summer, try the outdoor seats and front bar-restaurants along ul Knyaz Boris I and (a bit more upmarket) bul Slivnitsa, leading to Primorski Park, where at least a couple of waterfront bars keep hours in winter. This is a good place to try a beer with fried *tsatsa* fish.

**Vinagi Topli Zakuska** (cnr ul Tsar Simeon & ul Debăr; banitsas 0.60lv; ☎ 6am-7pm Mon-Fri, 6am-2pm Sat & Sun) The walk-up stand – its name means 'always warm breakfast' – draws lines for some of the country's best *banitsas*, plus chocolate- or fruit-filled rolls.

**Trops Káshta** (bul Knyaz Boris I 48; dishes 2-3lv; ☎ 8.30am-9pm) This bright pick-and-point chain offers fresh, cheap and fast Bulgarian staples. Prices drop by 30% after 8pm.

**Happy** (ul Preslav 11; dishes from 3lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) Bow your head at this holy site, mortal travellers; here in 1994 Bulgaria's enormously popular 'American' chain (a mix of TGIF's and Hooters) began. It mostly offers Bulgarian grill items.

**Orient Turkish Restaurant** (☎ 602 380; ul Tsaribrod 1; dishes 3-6lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) Chicken hearts and lamb heads are part of the (photo) menu, so watch what you order at this well-priced, atmospheric Turkish restaurant with traditional wooden bench seats.

**La Pastaria** (☎ 622 060; ul Dragoman 25; pastas 4.20-6.50lv; ☎ 11am-11pm Mon-Sat, 5-11pm Sun) This real-deal Italian place delivers with well-prepared salads and house-made pastas. There are eight pizzas, served on wooden platters. It's one of a few slightly upmarket eateries on Dragoman.

**Mr Baba** (☎ 614 629; ul Primorski at ferry road; fish dishes 6-19lv; ☎ 8am-midnight) Moored at the south end of the beach, the goofy novelty pirate-ship setting probably beats the uninspired food...



'Hold on, you feckin' landlubber – I'll keelhaul you,' declares the irate ghost of Mr Baba, a 17th-century pirate from nearby Kavarna. 'On me boat we swag the decks slip'ry, give the mates deck seats, and sea bass and red mullets comes just gutted like.' (Translation: the place is clean, there's open-air seating and the seafood is fresh and tasty.)

## Drinking

Now on to business. In summer, beach night-clubs/discos/bars open their doors along the beach and rattle locals' windows pretty much all hours. Some, such as **Las Playas**, incorporate the water, with inflatable chairs to float in. If you don't like what you see, move on; only a few charge an entry fee. Other stalwarts include **Pench's** (Guinness World Record holder for the biggest cocktail list, apparently), **Exit** and **Planetar**. Some open 'inland' locations off-season around town. Locations vary slightly season to season.

## Entertainment

Varna's great opera hits the stage at **Dramatic Theatre** (Opera House; ☎ 650 555; www.operavarna.bg; pl Nezavisimost). The screens at **Festival Hall** (☎ 685 000; bul Slivnitsa; tickets 3-4lv) show many English-language movies, or try **Mustang Cinema** (☎ 610 333; ul Bratya Shorpil 33; tickets 3-4lv).

## Getting There & Away

### AIR

**Varna airport** (☎ 650 835), 10.5km west of the centre, booms with charter-flight action from mid-April to October; all year there's a daily flight to/from Sofia (about €65/100 one way/return). Bus 409 waddles there, past the bus station from the centre; a taxi ride costs about 25lv.

### BOAT

There's no ferry service to Istanbul, but the curiously named **London Sky Travel** (☎ 601 330; www.lstravel.com.ua; Morska Gara) runs a weekly service to Odessa from May to September.

### BUS

The **main bus terminal** (☎ 433 162; bul Vladislav Varenchik) is 2km northwest of the city centre. Buses 409 and 148 stop near the main cathedral and at Slivnitska and Knyaz Boris I. Tickets for private buses can be bought at agencies in town, such as **Etap** (☎ 604 674; ul Slivnitsa 33; ☎ 9am-8pm) at Hotel Cherno More.

Direct buses:

**Athens** 137lv, 26 hours, one weekly (presently Sunday)  
**Balchik** 3lv, 50 minutes, five daily  
**Burgas** 8lv, 2½ hours, every 30 or 40 minutes (by microbus)  
**Istanbul** 40lv, 10 hours, three daily  
**Odessa** 88lv, 20 hours, one weekly (presently Saturday)  
**Plovdiv** 17lv, six hours, two daily  
**Ruse** 10lv, four hours, four daily  
**Shumen** 8lv, 1½ hours, four daily (plus Sofia buses)  
**Sofia** 22lv, seven to eight hours, every 45 minutes  
**Veliko Târnovo** 13lv, four hours, every 45 minutes

### MICROBUS

The **microbus terminal** (Avtogara Mladost; ☎ 500 039; ul Knyaz Cherkazki), 200m west of the bus station (cross the street via an underpass and go left – towards the centre – 50m, then right for a block), sends little buses hourly to Burgas from 7am to 6pm (8lv), and to Albena and Balchik (4lv) from 6.30am to 6.30pm. Less frequent services go to Nesebăr (via Sunny Beach) and Shumen. Note that some readers have complained about pickpockets here.

Microbuses also leave for Albena (4lv) from the more convenient stop at ul Maria Luisa.

### TRAIN

Direct train services from the **main train station** (☎ 630 444; bul Primorski link Varna to Sofia (18.70lv, 7½ to 8½ hours, at least six daily), Plovdiv (13.70lv, 6½ hours, three daily), Ruse (8.90lv, 3¾ hours, one or two daily) and Shumen (4.90lv, 1½ hours, six to eight daily).

Direct trains to Bucharest (50lv, 21 hours) are available from mid-June to mid-September only. International tickets must be purchased at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 632 348; ul Preslav 13; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3.30pm Sat), a few minutes' walk from the station.

## Getting Around

Local bus routes are listed on the Domino city map; tickets cost 0.60lv per ride. Some taxi drivers are prone to overcharging foreign travellers – make sure the meter is on. A couple of taxi services with clean(er) records include **Chaika Taxi** (☎ 644 444) and **Omega** (☎ 388 888).

Global Tours (p170) rents out cars from €16 per day.

## NORTH OF VARNA

Just north of Varna are several upmarket beach resorts that cater to rich foreigners on package tours, and further up are spots with more street cred. All can be visited on day trips from Varna

or Balchik. It's possible to walk across the Romania border at **Vama Veche**; taxis here go to Balchik for about €30 and minibuses across the border go on to Mangalia, Romania.

### Sveti Konstantin Свети Константин

Just 9km north of Varna, this small resort has several hotels along a pretty beach. The tiny **Sv Konstantin & Sv Elena Monastery** (admission free; ☎ dawn to dusk, except Sun morning) is just off Post Office Lane. Take bus 8 from ul Maria Luisa in Varna to the end of the line.

### Golden Sands Златни Пясъци

Bulgaria's second-largest resort, 18km north-east of Varna, Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasâtsi) has a 4km-long beach. The **Aladza Monastery** (☎ 052-355 460; admission 4lv; ☎ 9am-4pm) is a bizarre rock monastery. Stairs lead to and around the caves, whose heyday was in the 13th and 14th centuries. To get there on foot, head past the post office, cross the main highway and follow the signs to 'Kloster Aladja'.

Buses 109, 209, 309 and 409 connect Golden Sands with Varna about every 15 minutes between 6am and 11pm.

### Albena Албена

Possibly the best beach north of Sunny Beach (it's shallow enough to wade out 150m), Albena is a popular beach resort. Located behind the bus station, **Gorska Feia** (☎ 057-962 961) has camp sites and bungalows in a wooded setting about 500m from the beach.

Microbuses leave hourly for Albena from Varna (3lv, 30 minutes), continuing on to Balchik.

### Balchik Балчик

☎ 0579 / pop 12,400

Wedge between a rocky shoreline and white-chalk bluffs, Balchik – a 'real' town, after all the commercialised resorts – is a good alternative base for northern beaches.

The bus stop is 1km above the historic centre, by the water. Near the centre is a **DCK Bank** (☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) with an ATM. A **tourist information centre** (☎ 5797 2034; ul Ribarski) is open in summer.

In the 1920s, when the region was part of Romania, King Ferdinand built the (pricey) **Summer Palace Queen Marie & Botanical Gardens** (Dvoretsa; admission 10lv; ☎ 8am-8pm summer, 8am-7pm winter) for his wife because she wanted something 'small and romantic' (as a guide tells it).

The palace shows off Marie's eccentric tastes, mixing Islamic and Bulgarian revival styles. It's set near the water below lush gardens. It's a nice 2km walk south from the centre along the promenade.

In summer, accommodation agencies open their doors in the port area. **Esparansa** (☎ 75 148; ul Cherno More 16; s/d with shared bathroom 15/20lv), about 150m up from the port, is a four-room hotel open seasonally. It's a step into a past world, with lace tablecloths and overflowing bookcases dressing up four very eclectic rooms.

The more standard **Balchik Hotel** (☎ 72 809; www.hotel-balchik.com; s/d €15/25) faces quiet pl Nezavisimost, 400m up from the port.

In summer, buses wind down the coast hourly to Varna (3lv, one hour) stopping at beach resorts. They run less frequently off season.

### Kaliakra Cape Нос Калуакра

This 2km-long headland – its name meaning 'beautiful' – pokes out into the Black Sea about 30km northeast of Balchik. It's a popular boat and/or bus day trip for resort folk to the south, but is worth the effort. Plus you can see dolphins offshore. Most of the cape is part of the **Kaliakra Nature Reserve** (admission 3lv; ☎ 24hr), where you can witness the ruins of an 8th-century citadel being defecated on by 300 species of birds.

No public transport goes here. From Balchik, you can take a bus to Kavarna and then take a taxi, or walk 6km from the last bus stop at Bâlgarevo. Locals (with cars) like to stop off at **Midena Ferma** (Mussels Farm), between Balchik and Kavarna, for shellfish meals in a remote setting.

### Kamen Bryag (Stone Beach) & Around

Камен Бряг

About 18km north (by road) from Kaliakra Cape, this rocky cliff 'beach' is popular with rock-climbers who scale the rocks 4km north (at Tulenovo) rope-free, tumbling safely into the water. It's also possible to arrange scuba-diving trips. You'll need your own transport to make it here. Check agencies in Varna (p170) for trips that make it to this quiet but up-and-coming place.

### NESEBĂR НЕСЕБЪР

☎ 0554 / pop 9360

About 35km north of Burgas, historic and touristy Nesebăr sits on a small rocky isthmus on

the south end of the wide (and just about perfect) bay that's home to Sunny Beach a couple of kilometres away. A Unesco World Heritage site, Nesebâr is a tad nicer than Sozopol and flaunts its centuries, back to 3000 BC when Thracians settled Mesembria here. A lot of tourists come for that flaunting in summer.

**Biochim Commercial Bank** (ul Mesembria; ☎ 8.30am-12.15pm & 1-5.30pm Mon-Fri) cashes travellers cheques and has an ATM. The **tourist information centre** (☎ 42611; www.nesebarinfo.com; ul Mesembria 10; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) wryly confessed to not yet having any tourist information at last pass; hopefully its role will someday reflect its name. Internet access is available in summer at the **White House Hotel** (ul Tsar Simeon 2) and in Nesebâr's new town (about 1km west) all year. The town **post office** (☎ 8am-8pm Tue-Sat) is located on ul Mesembria.

## Sights

### CHURCHES

Even the churched-out should stroll by Nesebâr's Byzantine-influenced beauties (or ruins of their former shining selves), all built between the 6th and 14th centuries and once

numbering about 80. Most are free and some close in the off-season.

Now in ruins, the towering frame of the 6th-century **Basilica** (ul Mitropolitka) juts over the town's historic centre. One of the best-preserved churches is **Pantokrator Church** (ul Mesembria), built in the 14th century with a bell tower that now houses an art gallery. Most churches are jealous of the lookout spot facing the water of earthquake-battered (and busted) **St John Aliturgetos Church** (ul Mena).

### OTHER SIGHTS

There are a couple of museums in town, including the **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 46 012; ul Mesembria 2; admission 2.50lv; ☎ 9am-8pm summer, 9am-noon & 12.30-5pm Mon-Sat winter), which sees a daily tide of quick-look visitors in summer for its Thracian tombs and Roman tablets.

### Sleeping

Many lodgings are part of the package-trip loop, and even private rooms can book out. The following hotels are open all year.

**Hotel Toni** (☎ 42 403; ul Kraybrezhna; r 35-40lv; ☎) This friendly family hotel (just past the St

Georgi) is unsigned. It has 12 quiet, cosy rooms, some with seriously great balconies overlooking Sunny Beach.

**Hotel Rony** (☎ 44 001; ul Chaika 1; s/d incl breakfast summer 49/65lv, winter 34/45lv; ☎) This budget hotel, just past the town gate, has 11 clean, basic rooms.

**St Georgi Hotel** (☎ 44 045; www.gsk.5u.com; ul Sadala 10; r from 50lv) Stylish St Georgi, facing Sunny Beach, has a dozen rooms often full of package tourists.

**St Stefan Hotel** (☎ 43 603; st\_stefan@infotour.org; ul Ribarska 11; r summer 105lv; ☎) This classier 17-room hotel has balconies and overlooks its namesake church.

### Eating

**Neptun** (ul Neptun; mains from 5lv; ☎ 10am-11pm) One of several fish restaurants at the end of the main drag, Neptune has vine-covered outside tables on either side of the walkway. Splurge for grilled bluefish snagged offshore (about 15lv).

### Getting There & Away

Not all Varna-Burgas buses along the coast leave the main highway, 2km to the west. Nesebâr-bound buses stop in the new town, 1km west, and (usually) at the old town gate. From the old gate, up to half a dozen daily buses (more in summer) head north to Varna (8lv, two hours) and more often to Burgas (3lv, 40 minutes). Buses go to Sunny Beach every 15 or 30 minutes, or it's a 30-minute walk.

### SUNNY BEACH СЛЪНЧЕВ БРЯГ

Built for tourism, Nesebâr's famous neighbour, Sunny Beach (Slânchev Bryag), is a long strip of fine beach speckled with hotels marking (clearly) the eras they came from. It's said the beach has the capacity for 30,000 souls, while the hotels can fit 100,000! Overdevelopment has already taken away a lot of Sunny Beach's charm, but you can enjoy its setting on a day trip from Burgas. The centre is near the fading Hotel Kuban, with ATMs, internet cafés and lots of places to eat lining the 300m walkway to the water.

See the bus information for Burgas (p179), Nesebâr (above) and Varna (p174) for details on how to get here.

### BURGAS БУРГАС

☎ 056 / pop 189,500

A little ugly and a little unloved, the industrial port town of Burgas carries its own charm once you get down into it. Its beach can't

rival the best (or even Varna's), but open-air cafés, a more relaxed air, easy day-trip links to Sozopol and Nesebâr, and recently added flights on Wizz Air make it a pretty good beach-hopping base.

Hilariously, the rivalry between Varna and Burgas led the Varna-bred founder of national chain Happy Bar & Grill to ban expansion here.

### Information

Many sites and hotels have information at www.bourgas.net.

**Bulbank** (ul Aleksandrovka; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri) ATM.

**ENet Internet** (ul Tsar Boris; per hr 1.20lv; ☎ 24hr)

**Helikon Bookshop** (☎ 800 231; pl Troikata 4; ☎ 9am-7.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-7.30pm Sun) Near the university, this place has a great selection of maps and a few guidebooks.

**Internet Klub** (cnr ul Slavyanska & Bogoridi; per hr 1lv; ☎ 24hr)

**Left Luggage** (per bag 2lv; ☎ 6am-10pm) Outside the train station.

**Post Office** (ul Tsar Petâr)

**Telephone Booths** (ul Bogoridi 36; per min to UK or USA 0.30lv, to Australia 0.39lv; ☎ 9am-midnight) Calls are cheaper with a prepaid card.

**Tourist Service Agency** (Hotel Bulgaria; ☎ 840 601; Hotel Bulgaria, ul Aleksandrovka 21; ☎ 7.30am-7pm Mon-Fri, 7.30am-5pm Sat & Sun) Very helpful English-speaking staff can book bus tickets or help with rental cars (via TS Travel; see p179).

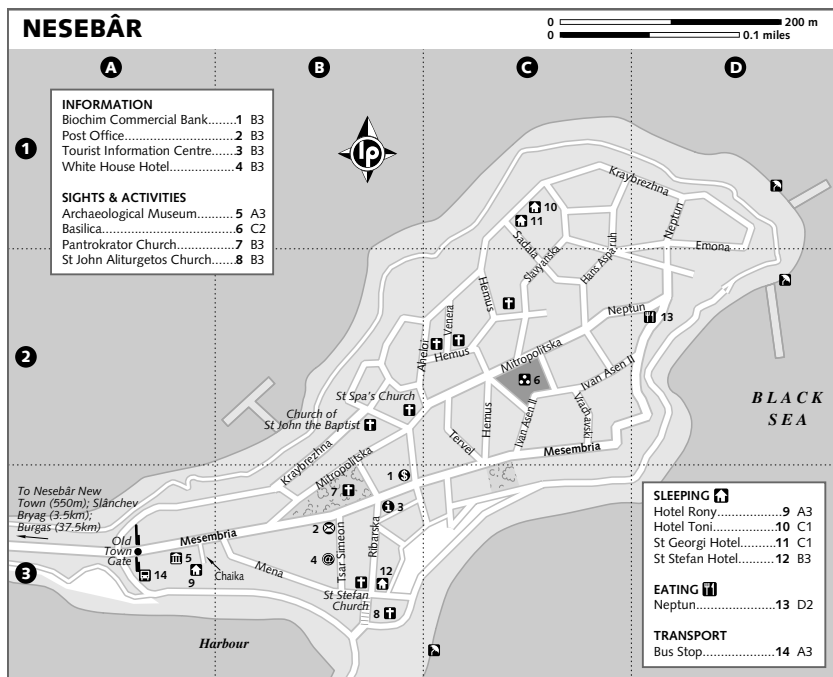
### Sights

Burgas' beach has a 2km-long strip of sand, and its long concrete pier sees a lot of strolling. It's not five-star lovely, but it doesn't get the Sunny Beach crowds either, plus its bars and clubs give Burgas a bolt of life on summer nights. Running alongside the beach is the pleasant, if a bit decaying, **Maritime Park**.

The museums in town aren't knockouts. Probably the best is the **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 842 586; ul Slavyanska 69; adult/student 2/1lv; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-mid-Jun, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri & 10am-6pm Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep), with two floors of hundred-year-old traditional clothing.

On the main mall, the pink **Archaeological Museum** (☎ 843 541; ul Bogoridi 21; admission 2/1lv; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-mid-Jun, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri & 10am-6pm Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep) has Thracian and Roman pieces, some of which are visible from outside. Ask for the leaflets, in various languages, to get more out of the museum.

Housed in a former synagogue, the **Art Gallery** (☎ 842 169; ul Mitropolit Simeon 24; admission



2lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-6pm Mon-Fri) has three floors of icons and modern Bulgarian art.

The towering Hotel Bulgaria (rooms not recommended) has a nice indoor **swimming pool** (pl Svoboda; admission 5lv; ☎ 9am-10pm) with a spa and a full bar; you can get smashed before you cannonball.

## Sleeping BUDGET

**Dim-ant** (☎ 840 779; [dimant91@abv.bg](mailto:dimant91@abv.bg); ul Tsar Simeon 15; per person from 9lv; ☎ 8am-9 or 10pm summer, 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri winter) finds homestay rooms in Burgas and along the coast. You can also try **Primorets Travel** (☎ 842 727; ul Ivan Vazov; per person 12lv; ☎ 7am-7pm summer, 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri winter) opposite the train station.

## MIDRANGE

**Fotinov Guest House** (☎ 579 018; ul K Fotinov 22; r 40-45lv; ☎) This fairly new 11-room boutique-inspired hotel has chic, rust-coloured shagpile carpet, colourful bedspreads, small work desks and TVs.

**Hotel Elite** (☎ 845 780; ul Morska 35; s/d incl breakfast 45/50lv) In a pleasant location off ul Bogodini, the Elite has nice new rooms – some with balcony, all with phone. Avoid the cramped attic room.

**Luxor** (☎ 847 670; [www.luxor-bg.com](http://www.luxor-bg.com); ul Bulair 27; s/d 70/80lv; ☎) This new Egyptian-style hotel is on a busy road a few blocks from the pedestrian mall, but has Burgas' smartest rooms (with safes in the closet and tiled bathrooms) for the price. Prices do not include breakfast.



## Eating

Walk up busy ul Bogoridi or ul Aleksandrovska to find the snack that suits you (big-ass doner kebabs are 3lv).

**BMS** (ul Aleksandrovska; dishes 1.30-2.40lv; ☎ 8am-10pm) Fluorescently lit, this is a peppy pick-and-point cafeteria with good Bulgarian food.

**Maracas** (ul Bogoridi 19; mains 3-6lv, desserts 1.89lv; ☎ 7am-midnight) The best sit-and-stare spot on the pedestrian mall is great for desserts, coffee and drinks – but you can find better pizza elsewhere.

**Okean** (ul Bogorodi 64; fish dishes 6-19lv; ☎ 11am-midnight) A popular place at end of the pedestrian mall, with a huge two-tiered patio and pleasant décor with a nautical vibe. It's known for its fish. The *lefer* (blue fish) is a Black Sea favourite (17lv).

## Entertainment

Ul Bogoridi and ul Aleksandrovska's cafés are de facto bars, with outside drinking buzzing most hours.

The unfortunately named **Party Club** (ul Bogoridi 36; cove 2lv; ☎ 11am-late) is a cavernous basement bar that lights up with original/cover rock bands.

**Cinema Septembri** (☎ 844 226; ul Georgi Kirkov; tickets 3lv) plays Hollywood films.

## Getting There & Away

For information on transport to nearby beach towns, see p181.

## AIR

The airport, 8km north of town, sees many charter flights in summer. From June to September, Wizz Air connects Burgas with Budapest (about €90 return) once weekly, and with London (about £180 return) two or three times weekly. Bus 15 (0.50lv, 15 minutes) heads to/from Yug Bus Terminal every half hour from 6am to 11pm.

## BUS

Most buses and minibuses leave from and arrive at the convenient **Yug Bus Terminal** (☎ 842 692; near cnr ul Aleksandrovska & ul Bulair). However, Varna-bound buses from central Bulgaria usually drop off Burgas passengers at the **Zapad Bus Terminal** (☎ 831 429), 2km west of the centre. City bus 4 connects the two.

Buses from Yug connect Burgas with Sofia (17lv to 19lv, six hours, every 30 minutes or hour), Veliko Tarnovo (17lv, four hours, two

daily), Kazanlak (15lv, 2½ hours, three daily) and Plovdiv (14lv to 16lv, four hours, six to nine buses daily). There are also several buses daily to Varna (8lv, 2½ hours, every 30 or 40 minutes) as well as spots along the coast (see p181). A few buses a day go to Kotel from Zapad.

Travel agencies along ul Bulair sell reserved seats for buses. **Enturtrans** (☎ 844 708; ul Bulair 22; ☎ 6.30-1am) handles domestic trips only. Day buses go to Istanbul (35lv, seven hours) daily from **Nisikli Turizm** (☎ 841 261; ul Bulair).

## CAR

**TS Travel** (☎ 845 060; [www.tstravel.net](http://www.tstravel.net); ul Bulair 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) rules the car-rental business in Burgas; its high rates (starting at €44 a day) justify making a trip to Varna by bus to rent.

## TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 845 022) sells domestic train tickets behind old-school ticket booths. Off-season links include Sofia (14.30lv, seven to eight hours, six daily), Plovdiv (10.70lv, four to five hours, three daily), and stops in Sliven and Kazanlak. Summer usually sees a couple of extra services.

A train to Bucharest runs in summer only; buy tickets at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 845 242; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) in the station.

## SOZOPOL СОЗОПОЛ

☎ 0550 / pop 4650

A Nesebar without the Sunny Beach package-trip beat, Sozopol – with a lovely stone-step centre on a jutting peninsula and two sandy beaches in town – still brings plenty of sun seekers.

The town, 31km southeast of Burgas, has two parts: the peninsular (old) and inland Harmanite (new). The bus terminal is roughly between the two.

In the old town, you'll find several foreign-exchange offices (including one that says 'The best change you can ever made') and a couple of banks including **HVB Bank Biochim** (ul Apolonia 11A; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) with an ATM. There's **Internet** (ul Apolonia) in peak season.

## Sights

Sozopol has two good beaches, though the water can get a little rough. The slightly nicer **town beach**, about 500m long, has umbrellas to rent. The much longer **Harmanite Beach** is lined with cafés. There's calmer waters on the beach 2km to the north.



Just offshore is the 6.6-sq-km **St John's (Ivan) Island**. A 19th-century lighthouse watches over some 13th-century monastery ruins and, at times, 70 species of birds. Sea taxis make the 30-minute trip (5lv to 7lv per person) in summer.

The old town has several churches and museums, all of which tend to be closed in the off season. The pink-and-white **Art Gallery of Sozopol** (ul Kiril & Metodii 70; admission 1.5lv; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Sat) has enough sea-motif paintings to soothe your inner pirate.

### Sleeping

During summer, an accommodation stand booking private rooms (about 20lv per person and up) operates near the bus stop. All hotels,

sadly, are in the new town. The following are open all year.

**Sasha Khristov's Private Rooms** (☎ 0888-759 174; ul Venets 17; r with shared bathroom 21lv) A lovely family homestead in the old town with four homely rooms with terraces and a kitchen to use.

**Hotel Radik** (☎ 23 706; ul Republikanska 4; r per person 25-30lv; ☎) Just up the hill from the bus stop (one of several options in 'new town'), this bright 15-room hotel has spotless rooms and balconies. It's a good deal, and there's a terrace bar in summer.

**Hotel Dimanti** (☎ 22 640; www.hoteldiamanti.com; ul Morski Skali; d/apt 70/100lv) This 20-room modern take on Soz's past sits looking over an empty rocky bluff at the sea. Under renovation at

last pass, the 22 rooms will have balconies and all mod cons.

**Gradina Camping** has bungalows and lots of tent space near the beach, 2km north of town.

### Eating

A good place to sample fresh cuts of Black Sea fish is at the open-air fish restaurants along the port (open only in summer). Ul Morski Skali has several *mekhanas* with island views and terrific food, including **Ksantana** (☎ 122 454; ul Morski Skali 7; mains 3.20-12lv; ☎ 11am-11pm), which has a huge menu in English.

### Entertainment

**Lyatno Kino Sozopol** (ul Apolonia 50) An outdoor walled space with benches facing the screen for Hollywood's latest at 9pm and 11pm.

### Getting There & Away

Buses and minibuses leave the **bus terminal** (ul Han Krum) for Burgas (3lv, 40 minutes, half-hourly 6am to 9pm) all year. From June to September it's usually possible to take buses south to Primorsko, Kiten, Ahtopol and (possibly) Sinemorets. At other times it's necessary to return to Burgas first.

### SOUTH OF SOZOPOL

The principal towns along this bay-to-bay stretch – Primorsko, Kiten, Ahtopol and far-off Sinemorets – have some nice beaches, though the towns lack the historical charm of Sozopol or Nesebăr. It's possible, with pa-

tience and planning, to hop around by public bus; see left. Generally, private rooms aren't hard to find at any of the following.

The bustling resort town of **Primorsko** aspires to be Sunny Beach's little bro, and many Eastern European package trippers come here for the 3km-long sheltered beach, ideal for swimming and boating. **Hotel Stop** (☎ 0888-850 820; r May-Oct 50lv) has 34 nice rooms.

Southbound buses also stop at **Kiten**, 5km south, with hotels and two beaches, where beach bars keep going till 2am or 3am in summer.

About 35km south of Primorsko, and after the road gets bumpy, is the larger town of **Ahtopol**, with a pretty good long beach. At least three daily buses head south from here to Sinemorets.

Bulgaria ends its Black Sea turf with a bang in booming **Sinemorets**, 11km north of the (closed) Turkish border. The town is just scattered new villas and hotels along bumpy dirt roads on a wide, bare bluff that bows toward a bay cupped with lovely golden sand – and another, better one just beyond. This area (and inland west) comprises the wildlife-lush **Strandzha Nature Park**. In town, American-run **Villa Philadelphia** (☎ 0550-66106; www.villaphiladelphia) is a good accommodation choice.

## NORTHWEST BULGARIA

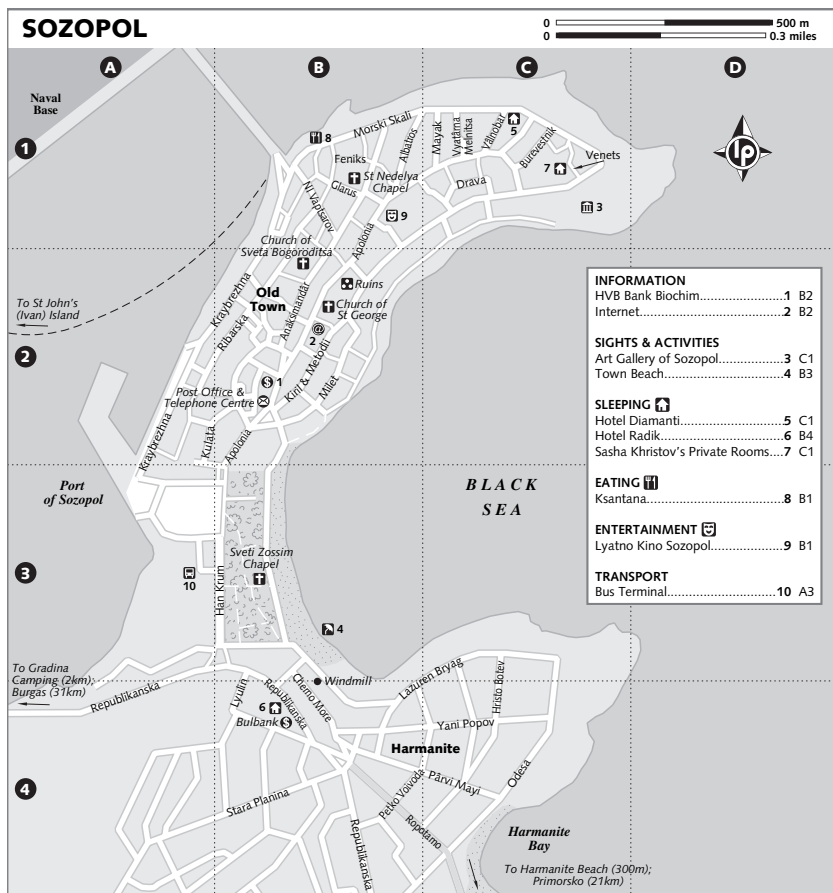
Neglected, even mocked, Bulgaria's little pinkie – wedged between Romania and Serbia – sees few foreign travellers. Vidin is a gateway to Romania by river or to Serbia via bus, and is near Belogradchik's fortress. The train from Sofia goes past impressive **Iskăr Gorge**, south of Mezdra.

In 2006, dead migratory swans infected with the Avian bird flu were found outside Vidin, and some villages were briefly quarantined. No-one was infected, nor were any local birds.

### VIDIN ВИДИН

☎ 094 / pop 53,500

If rivers could rank cities, Vidin would score for its locals' misty-eyed devotion to the Danube. While its newly developed riverside park offers Bulgaria's finest spot to hang with the mighty Dan, Vidin is most useful as a link to Belogradchik.



### GETTING AROUND THE SOUTH COAST

Bus schedules up and down the coast – from Sunny Beach to Sinemorets – change wildly every summer. At research time, buses left Burgas half-hourly 6am to 8pm for Sozopol (3lv, 40 minutes), Sunny Beach (3lv, 45 minutes) and Nesebăr (3lv, 45 minutes).

More preplanning is suggested for more distant spots; at research time seven buses daily left Burgas for Primorsko (5lv or 6lv, one hour), Kiten (6lv, 1¼ hours) and Ahtopol (7lv to 8lv, 1¾ hours). These usually don't stop in Sozopol.

Taxi drivers cruise for lucrative beach-hopping runs – prices can reach 100lv or more to reach Sinemorets!

The cheapest rental cars are in Varna (p170).

At the main square (pl Bdintsi), two blocks north of the stations, you'll find a bank and ATM.

About 1km north of the centre is the interesting **Baba Vida Museum-Fortress** (☎ 601 705; admission 2lv; ☞ 9am-5pm), once a 1st-century Roman citadel, though much of what remains was rebuilt by Turks in the 1600s.

**Hotel Dunav** (☎ 600 177; ul Edelvais 3; s/d from 17/24lv) is a decent budget option – some rooms are better than others.

Ten or more daily buses connect Vidin's **bus station** (☎ 23179) with Sofia (15lv, four hours), and five or six go to Belogradchik (3.50lv, 1½ hours), the first at 7.30am. A couple of buses daily head for Nagoutin, Serbia.

The train station, across from the bus station, sees four daily trains en route to/from Sofia (10.20lv, 5½ hours).

Talk of a bridge to Romania is still just that: talk. You supposedly can cross to Calafat, Romania, by passenger ferry (€3) or, when one's not going, on the (when full) car ferry (€10 per car, €3 per passenger) north of town.

## BELOGRADCHIK БЕЛОГРАДЧИК

☎ 0936 / pop 5640

A village sprawling along a rising mountain, remote Belogradchik draws many Bulgarian travellers to see its phenomenal fortress and stirring craggy red-rock peaks so lifelike they're named for people. It's an amazing sight.

The town has a bank with an ATM on the main road, which starts a block up from the bus station.

Propped upon and between jagged peaks, the huge **Kaleto Fortress** (☎ 3001; admission 2.5lv; ☞ 9am-8pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar), a 1km walk up from the main square (follow the signs and veer left at the old mosque), occupies a shocking setting – with Turk-built walls surrounding the peaks. Above the walls on the peaks are smooth spots to sit and listen to sheep bells clang from far-off fields. Romans first built here in the 1st century AD, and the site was later used to fight off Hungarian troops (unsuccessfully) in the 14th century. Ask at the information stand about visits to nearby **caves**.

It's possible to loop back on trails behind the fort to town, via the **Belogradchiski Skali** rock formations (aka 'Bulgaria's Grand Canyon'). The formations are accessible from town, starting about 100m behind (and down from) the main square.

**Hotel St Valentine** (☎ 4002; pl Benkovski 1; s/d 20/40lv) pushes it in the romance column, but this eight-room option is clean and central.

In a home that feels like a gingerbread house, **Madona** (☎ 5546; www.hotelmadona.hit.bg, in Bulgarian; ul Hristo Botev 26; s/d 35/60lv) is a B&B with small but nice traditional rooms. It's 600m up from the main square (follow signs to 'hotel').

A lone daily direct bus leaves Belogradchik for Sofia (10lv, four hours) at 7am; the bus leaves Sofia's Traffic Market at 4pm. A handful of buses go to Vidin, and buses are scheduled to meet trains en route to Sofia at Oroshets station (a crappy town 15km east).

## BULGARIA DIRECTORY

### ACCOMMODATION

Accommodation listings in this guide have been ordered by price from cheapest to most expensive (ie budget to top end). In addition to the following options, most active monasteries have basic rooms for as little as 10lv per night (just no drinking binges, kids).

In the recent past, immigration officials pored over 'registration' forms from hotels where travellers stayed; the practice of form-filling continues, but we haven't heard of officials asking for them. Hold on to them just in case.

### Camping & Huts

Camping is not on the rise in Bulgaria. Generally, 'camping' here refers to rather lifeless areas where bungalows sit side by side in a small thicket of woods. Camp sites can be cheap though (3lv or 5lv). Discreet camping outside the camping ground is, as one local says, 'No problem – just don't have a loud party – and say you have permission if anyone asks.' In other words, it's not technically legal and you probably shouldn't do it.

**Hizhas** (mountain huts) dot the high country and range in quality. Many are now privately run (and cost about €7 to €10 per person); some more remote ones are free. Most Bulgaria maps show these. Some fill in July and August; reserve ahead at an agency such as Zig Zag in Sofia (p139).

### Hostels

Bulgaria's big four – Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Tarnovo and Varna – are the only places with hostels. Sofia's hostel scene, in particular, is

richly developed. Expect to pay €10 per person in a dorm, including free breakfast and internet use, and often free pick-up from a bus or train station.

### Hotels

Generally hotels have private bathrooms (sometimes down the hall), in-room TV, heating and a fan if not air-conditioned, and about half of them offer free breakfast. All entries in this chapter have private bathrooms and TV unless otherwise noted. Most double rooms have two twin beds. Average rates for a cheapie are around 30lv for a single and 40lv for a double. In some tourist locations this rate can drop by 10lv in the off season. Higher-end hotels – recently built, in more modern style (and with thicker walls) – generally start at 45lv to 60lv for a single.

Many communist-era Balkantourist high-rises still plod ahead in these new times. They are often ridiculed, but it's worth staying at one once (those in Varna and Sliven aren't bad choices): they often have good locations, and seeing their interiors (broken mint-and-beige phones, grey-and-brown 1970s curtains and chunky AM radios) feels like stepping into the Cold War era. They won't be there forever.

### Private Rooms

Travellers on a budget should rent private rooms (*stai pod naem*), often offered by agencies, signed homes or English-speaking touts at train and bus stations. Rates range from 10lv or 15lv per person in smaller towns to 25lv in places such as Sofia, Plovdiv and Varna. Often private rooms mean a shared bathroom in a shared flat with a family; sometimes grandma sleeps in the kitchen.

### ACTIVITIES

Hiking options in the four principal mountain ranges abound (more than 37,000km of trails in all). For hiking tips, see p148, p151 and p158. Kartografia publishes excellent trail maps, available in Sofia and elsewhere. Zig Zag in Sofia (p139) runs guided tours and gives well-informed tips, and Veliko Tarnovo's Trapezitsa (p164) leads a week-long hike in the Stara Planina.

Some trails are open to mountain bikes, or can be cross-country skied in winter.

Bulgaria's reputation as a cheap downhill skiing (and snowboarding) destination is outliving its deals. Its three main resorts –

Borovets (p150), Bansko (p150) and Pamporovo (p157) – all charge about 45lv for a one-day lift ticket, with an extra 20lv to 40lv to rent equipment. Mt Vitosha (p147) is cheaper, as are the evocatively older lifts at Maliovishta (near Borovets) or Dobronishte (near Bansko). The ski season runs mid-December to mid-April. Check www.bulgariaski.com for loads of information plus package deals.

The popularity of rock-climbing is on the rise, with good options all over, including outside Veliko Tarnovo as well as on the coast at Kamen Bryag (p175), while Trapezitsa (p164) helps host international events, rents equipment and offers tours.

Caving tours are another draw, such as those near Belogradchik (opposite).

### BOOKS

Lonely Planet's *Bulgaria* offers more comprehensive coverage of the country. For history, RJ Crampton's *A Concise History of Bulgaria* gives a quick (if a little dull) overview from the pre-Thracian era to postcommunism. The communist-era 'KGB' world is uncovered in Alexenia Dimitrova's *The Iron Fist: Inside the Archives of Bulgaria's Secret Police*. Bill Bryson pokes a little fun at Sofia in his 1992 book *Neither Here Nor There: Travels in Europe*.

### BUSINESS HOURS

Banks and most public offices are open Monday to Friday, roughly 8.30am to 5pm or 6pm, sometimes with an hour off for lunch. Many shops and all foreign-exchange booths are open daily, and most internet cafés are open 24 hours, though we've seen 'nonstop' shops with roughly 8am to 11pm hours, too. Many post offices are open daily.

Hours for many Bulgarian museums and shops drift. It can depend on the season (in winter, some museums may close for a few weeks unexpectedly, while summer sees longer hours) or the whim of the guy with the keys ('Oh sorry, Hristo is meeting a cousin in Pleven; come back tomorrow.'). Hours in this chapter reflect the official line, but brace yourself for the occasional hiccup.

'Summer' and 'winter' refer to either side of daylight savings.

### COURSES

It's possible to study Bulgarian language in Sofia (p142) and Veliko Tarnovo (p164). You can also learn traditional Bulgarian music or

dance at heralded schools in Plovdiv (p154), Kotel (p162) and Shiroka Laka (p158).

## DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

As long as you don't leave bags unattended at train or bus stations, or wear an unzipped backpack, you're unlikely to have problems in Bulgaria. Pickpocketing is most common in summer in Sofia and Varna. You will be warned by some Bulgarians that Roma will rob you blind (example: 'You'll be lucky to keep your pants'), which is an annoyance in itself.

Smoke is the number-one annoyance for the uninitiated. By law, all restaurants must set aside 'nonsmoking' areas, often a lone table surrounded by 'smoking' ones. Many hotels do not have smoke-free rooms, but the trend is for more to set aside non-smoking rooms.

## DISCOUNT CARDS

Students can save 50% or 75% on admission at most museums, and on airfares from some travel agents. Usit Colours in Sofia (p139) and Veliko Tarnovo (p163) can issue student cards for 10lv.

## EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

### Bulgarian Embassies & Consulates

**Australia** (☎ 02-9327 7581; fax 02-9327 8067; 4 Carlotta Rd, Double Bay, NSW 2028)

**Canada** (☎ 1-613-789 3215; fax 1-613-789 3524; 325 Steward St, Ottawa, ON K1N 6K5)

**France** (☎ 01 45 51 85 90; www.bulgaria.com/embassy/france; 1 Ave Rapp, 75007 Paris)

**Germany** (☎ 030-201 09 22; bbotscaft@myokay.net; Mauer Strasse 11, Berlin 10117)

**Greece** Athens (☎ 30-1-647 8106; fax 30-1-647 8130; 33 Stratigou Kallari St, 15452 Paleo Psychico, Athens); Thessaloniki (☎ 031-829 210; Edmundo Abot 1, Thessaloniki)

**Ireland** (☎ 0353-1-660 3293; fax 0353-1-660 3915; 22 Burlington Rd, 4 Dublin)

**Israel** (☎ 972-3-524 1751; fax 972-3-524 1798; 124 Ibn Gvirol St, 62308 Tel Aviv)

**Macedonia** (☎ 03-8991-229 444; fax 03-8991-116 139; 3 Zlatko Shnaider St, Skopje 1000)

**Netherlands** (☎ 031-70-350 3051; Duinroosweg 9, 2597 KJ The Hague)

**Romania** (☎ 040-1-230 2150; fax 040-1-230 7654; Str Rabat 5, sec 1, Bucharest)

**Serbia** (☎ 038-11-64 62 22; fax 038-11-64 10 80; 26 Birchaninova St, Belgrade)

**Turkey** Ankara (☎ 090-312-426 7455; Atatürk Bulvari 124, Kavaklıdere, Ankara); Istanbul (☎ 090-212-281 0115; fax 090-212-264 1011; Ahmet Adnan Saygun Caddesi 44, Ulus-Levent 80600)

**UK** (☎ 020-7584 9400; www.bulgarianembassy.org.uk; 186-88 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HL)

**USA** (☎ 1-202-387 0174; www.bulgaria-embassy.org; 1621 22nd St NW, Washington DC 20008)

### Embassies & Consulates in Bulgaria

Designated visiting hours for citizens or those seeking visas are listed. New Zealanders can turn to the UK Embassy for assistance, or contact their **consulate general** (☎ 210-6874 701; 268 Kifissias Ave) in Athens. All of the below are in Sofia unless stated:

**Australia** (☎ 02-946 1334; ul Trakia 37) Main office in Athens, call for hours.

**Canada** (☎ 02-969 9717; ul Moskovska 9)

**Denmark** (☎ 02-917 0100; bul Dondukov 54)

**France** (☎ 02-965 1100; www.ambafrance-bg.org, in French; ul Oborishte 27-29)

**Germany** (☎ 02-918 380; ul Frederic Joliot-Curie 25)

**Greece** (☎ 02-946 1750; ul San Stefano 33; ☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri); Plovdiv (☎ 032-632 003; ul Preslav 10)

**Hungary** (☎ 02-963 1135; ul 6 Septemvri 57; ☎ visas 9am-11am Mon, Wed & Fri)

**Ireland** (☎ 02-980 0642; bul Stamboliiski 55, fl 4)

**Macedonia** (☎ 02-701 560; ul Frederic Joliot-Curie 17; ☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri)

**Netherlands** (☎ 02-816 0300; www.netherlands.embassy.bg; ul Oborishte 15; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Fri)

**Poland** (☎ 02-987 2610, visa info ☎ 02-981 8545; ul Han Krum 46; ☎ visas 9am-1pm Mon-Wed & Fri)

**Romania** (☎ 02-971 2858; bul M Eminesku 4; ☎ visas 3-5pm Tue, 10am-noon Wed & Thu) New Zealanders can get visas for Romania in one day for €30.

**Russia** (☎ 02-963 0914; www.bulgaria.mid.ru, in Russian; bul Dragan Tskankov 28)

**Turkey** (☎ 02-935 5500; bul Vasil Levski 80; ☎ 9.30am-1pm Mon-Fri); Plovdiv (☎ 032-632 309; ul Filip Makedonski 10)

**UK** (☎ 02-933 9222; www.british-embassy.bg; ul Moskovska 9)

**USA** (☎ 02-937 5100; www.usembassy.bg; ul Kozyak 16)

## FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Bulgaria hosts many fascinating shindigs. City-run music and cultural events happen from spring to autumn. Koprivshitsa's folk festival is a big one (see p159) and Varna's music festival (p172) spans nearly half a year; others are listed throughout this chapter. Kazanlak's three-day splash-out for the Rose Festival (p160) ends on the first Sunday in June.

As part of the national custom of Martenitsa in March, most Bulgarians wear red-and-white yarn figures until they see a stork, when they tie the figure to a tree.

Also in March, the *kukeri* festival – famous in Shiroka Laka (p158) – is held on the first Sunday before Lent, when oddly masked dancers ward off evil spirits.

## GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Consensual homosexual sex is legal in Bulgaria. One of the nation's biggest stars, male singer Azis, is purposely sexually ambiguous, but Bulgaria is not yet gay-friendly.

The best source for discos, bars and gay beaches is www.bulgaria.com. **Bulgarian Gay Organization Gemini** (www.bgogemini.org) is a largely political organisation based in Sofia, but can help point out places to go. Sofia has a pretty good range of bars and clubs, but there's almost nothing elsewhere.

## HOLIDAYS

Official public holidays:

**New Year's Day** 1 January

**Liberation Day** (aka National Day); 3 March

**Orthodox Easter Sunday & Monday** March/April; one week after Catholic/Protestant Easter

**St George's Day** 6 May

**Cyrillic Alphabet Day** Our favourite!: 24 May

**Unification** (aka National Day); 6 September

**Bulgarian Independence Day** 22 September

**National Revival Day** 1 November

**Christmas** 25 and 26 December

## INTERNET RESOURCES

In recent years Bulgaria has had an internet boom, with many agencies and attractions setting up sights. A few catch-all sites:

**www.bdz.bg** Train schedule and fares.

**www.bulgariatravel.org** Official tourist site, with detailed background and photos.

**www.centralnaavtogara.bg** Sofia's bus station lists Sofia-based bus routes.

**www.onlinebg.com** News, shopping, links.

**www.sofiacityguide.com** Monthly publication's website, with loads of national information.

**www.sofiaecho.com** English-language paper that has national coverage, travel tips and extensive archives.

## LANGUAGE

Almost everything is written in Cyrillic (even 'kseroks' for Xerox). Highway signs are written in Roman and Cyrillic. Most Bulgarians in their early 30s and older know a fair bit of Russian, but English is the vogue second-language of choice these days. Remember that Cyrillic is a Bulgarian invention – it's the Russians who borrowed it.

See p945 for a list of useful Bulgarian words and phrases.

## MONEY

In touristy places and upmarket hotels, many prices are quoted in euros. Prices in this chapter reflect quotes given by individual businesses. Many speculate that prices could skyrocket with integration to the EU – meaning the prices in this chapter may woefully undercut the real deal. Aside from this, prices remained roughly the same in the past few years *except* for bus and train fares (which rose by about 25% from 2004 to 2006) – and of course real estate.

## ATMs

ATMs (cash points) are ubiquitous and compatible with foreign cards (ask your bank). Even towns such as Rila, Belogradchik and Melnik have them.

## Cash

The local currency, the lovely leva (lv), comprises 100 stotinki. It's been pegged to the euro (roughly 2:1) since January 2002. In touristy places and upmarket hotels, many prices are quoted in euro. Banknotes come in denominations of one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 leva, and coins in one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 stotinki. The little horse guy on the coins is from a bas-relief made in the 8th century at Madara (p168).

## Exchanging Money

It's not a problem changing money in Bulgaria – foreign-exchange offices (many working nonstop) are found in every town. You'll get receipts from these and at banks, but there's no reason to hold onto them. US dollars, UK pounds and euro are the best currencies to carry.

### ONE PRICE, ONE WORLD

In January 2006, the long clung-to, communist-era, dual-pricing scheme where foreigners paid double (or more) for museums and hotels was scrapped. Unfortunately for locals, the change often resulted in simply scrapping the lower price, meaning Bulgarians found themselves paying 'foreign' prices. Some hotels and museums, however, have split the difference.

## Travellers Cheques

American Express and Thomas Cook cheques can be cashed at nearly all banks; Visa and CitiCorp cheques are also frequently cashed. Bulbank, the country's official bank, often charges the lowest commission rate – 0.2% (minimum €1 per transaction, regardless of how many cheques are cashed). There's a 2% fee to cash cheques into the same currency.

## POST

Sending a postcard or letter to anywhere outside Bulgaria costs 1.40lv. Many post offices in bigger cities are open daily.

## TELEPHONE

In most cities and towns you'll find a Bulgarian Telecommunications Centre (BTC) inside, or next to, the main post office, from where you can make local or international calls (it costs about 0.36lv per minute to call overseas and 0.72lv to call a mobile phone). But when possible, use Net cards (accessed by toll-free numbers from bigger cities) or make international Net calls from internet cafés. Rates are as little as 0.20lv per minute to call the UK, USA or Australia.

Nearly all Mobika and BulFon telephone booths use phonecards (*fonkarta*) for local or international calls. Cards are available from newsstands for 5lv to 25lv. Orange BulFon booths double as free clocks – pick up the receiver to see the time.

The mobile-phone craze has certainly reached Bulgaria. M-tel, Globul and Vivatel are the three operators. Numbers have different codes (eg ☎ 087 and ☎ 088). Costs are substantially more expensive than land lines.

## Area Codes

To ring Bulgaria from abroad, dial the international access code then ☎ 359, followed by the area code (minus the first zero) then the number.

To call direct from Bulgaria, dial ☎ 00 followed by the country code.

## TOURIST INFORMATION

Cities such as Sofia and Plovdiv lack real city-oriented tourist information centres, while smaller places such as Smolyan and Shiroka Laka have two offices with English-speaking staff and tonnes of brochures. For information, you can always resort to the many travel agents or hotels. Information centres can generally find

### EMERGENCY NUMBERS

Bulgaria hopes to create a single emergency number (☎ 112) by the time this book is published.

- Ambulance ☎ 150
- Directory Assistance ☎ 144
- Fire ☎ 160
- Police ☎ 166

private accommodation, help with information on special events and sometimes rent cars at good rates. The best ones even rent bikes.

## TOURS

Though city tours exist, most independent travellers will be OK on their own. Exceptions to consider definitely include hiking tours into rugged mountains, rock-climbing tours and day trips to Rila Monastery from Sofia.

Also see Information sections in the text and Activities, p183.

## VISAS

At the time of research, citizens of the following countries don't require a visa, and are instead issued a free 30-day entry stamp at any Bulgarian border, international airport or seaport: Australia, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, UK and USA. Citizens of other EU countries will receive 90-day tourist visas. Russians and Turks need to arrange visas.

The easiest way to get an extension on your stay is by leaving the country and returning the same or next day. It may be possible to pay 200lv for an extension at the passport offices in Sofia and Plovdiv, but it's easier to leave the country and return.

# TRANSPORT IN BULGARIA

## GETTING THERE & AWAY

### Air

Bulgaria's three most active airports are in Sofia, Varna and Burgas. **Wizz Air** (www.wizzair.com) flies four times weekly from Budapest to Sofia. **Sky Europe** (www.skyeurope.com) connects Bratislava with Sofia four times weekly. No additional

departure tax is levied outside the price of your ticket.

Airlines flying to/from Bulgaria (all addresses are for Sofia):

- Aeroflot** (www.aeroflot.ru; ☎ 02-943 4489)
- Air France** (www.airfrance.com; ☎ 02-939 7010, airport 937 3207; ul Săborna 5)
- Alitalia** (www.alitalia.it; ☎ 02-981 6702; ul Graf Ignatiev 40)
- Austrian Airlines** (www.aua.com; ☎ 02-980 2323; bul Vitosha 41)
- British Airways** (www.britishairways.com; ☎ 02-945 7000, airport 945 9227)
- Bulgaria Air** (www.air.bg; ☎ 02-937 3243, 02-865 9557; airport)
- ČSA** (Czech Airlines; www.csa.cz/en; ☎ 02-937 3175)
- Hemus Air** (www.hemusair.bg; ☎ 02-981 8330; airport)
- LOT Polish Airlines** (www.lot.com; ☎ 02-987 4562; bul Aleksandăr Stambulski 27A)
- Lufthansa** (www.lufthansa.com; ☎ 02-937 3141, 02-980 4242; airport)
- KLM** (www.klm.com; ☎ 02-981 9910; ul Patriarh Estimi 36B)
- Malév** (Hungarian Airlines; www.malev.com; ☎ 02-945 9239; airport)
- Turkish Airlines** (www.turkishairlines.com; ☎ 02-945 9145, 02-988 3596)
- Wizz Air** (www.wizzair.com; ☎ 02-960 3888)

## Land

### BORDER CROSSINGS

The most popular entry/exit between Bulgaria and the region is at the Ruse–Giurgiu border with Romania (en route to/from Bucharest); no buses go to Romania, so most travellers go by train, enduring a 60- to 90-minute border check on both sides.

Macedonia-bound buses and trains leave from Sofia (via the Gyueshevo–Deve Bair crossing) and Blagoevgrad (via the Stanke Lischkovo–Delčevo crossing); Belgrade-bound buses and trains from Sofia cross at Kalotina–Dimitrovgrad, Serbia (some travellers have preferred the train on this route). It's also possible to get to Serbia by bus from Vidin, via the Vrăshka Chuka–Zajc crossing.

Bus and train information for links with Greece and Turkey are included in this chapter.

### BUS

International tickets to the region (and beyond) are available at practically any bus station in the country. There's not one set price, so it's worth checking a couple of companies.

### SAVING LEVA ON TRAINS

If you're taking an international train from Bulgaria, you can save 25% or more of the ticket price by purchasing a domestic ticket to the border town (eg Ruse en route to Bucharest), where you can hop off and buy the onward international ticket.

## CAR & MOTORCYCLE

Drivers bringing cars into Bulgaria are sometimes asked to pay a 'road fee', based on where you're going. One option is to say you're heading to the nearest big city (eg if crossing from Greece, say 'going to Sofia' and pay €10, rather than €50 for Varna). Allegedly you won't have to show the receipt upon leaving. Drivers must also pay a €3 'disinfection fee'.

## TRAIN

Tickets for international trains can be bought at any government-run **Rila Bureau** (www.bdz-rila.com; ☎ open weekdays only) or at some stations' dedicated ticket offices (most open daily) at larger stations with international connections.

The daily Trans-Balkan Express (between Budapest and Thessaloniki, Greece) stops at Ruse, Gorna Oryahovitsa (near Veliko Tărnovo), Sofia and Sandanski.

A daily train connects Sofia with Belgrade (and good connections to Western and Central Europe) and Istanbul.

The Bulgaria Express (aka 'the Russian train', between Sofia and Moscow) stops in Ruse once weekly (three times in summer). From mid-June to September, trains leave from Varna and Burgas en route to Bucharest, Budapest, Bratislava and Prague. Another summer train also connects Bucharest with Sofia, via Ruse and Gorna Oryahovitsa.

## River

You can ferry across the Danube River from Vidin (p182) or cross by train from Ruse (p168).

## GETTING AROUND

Travelling around Bulgaria is cheap. Prices are the same for foreigners and locals.

## Air

Hemus Air flies between Sofia and Varna daily (about €100 return), with extra flights

in summer, when there are also flights to Burgas. See p186 for airline contact information.

### Bicycle

Traffic is relatively light outside the cities, but winding curves in the mountains and/or potholes everywhere can be obstacles.

Bulgaria has few bike-rental options: you can rent wheels at Zig Zag (p139) or Kervan Hostel (p143) in Sofia, in Veliko Târnovo (p164) or the tourist information centre in Koprivshitsa (p159). Most towns have bike shops that can make repairs or sell some spare parts. You may need to pay an extra fee to take a bike on a train or bus.

### Boat

Sadly there's no regular boat service down the Danube River.

### Bus

Buses (public and private) and minibuses connect all cities and major towns. More popular routes – such as Sofia–Varna – have nice, modern buses; but there are also more ramshackle varieties.

Outside Sofia, centralised information is difficult to find, as stations have a confusing array of private bus booths advertising overlapping destinations; schedules also change frequently. Generally buses leave from 7am to 6pm only. Most bus stations have a left-luggage service with long (but not 24-hour) opening hours.

This chapter lists prices, duration for trips and number of buses daily – *they're changeable, so use them as a gauge only.*

### Car & Motorcycle

Renting a car from a local agent – not an international company, who may charge four or five times the rate – is a great way to beach-hop or visit mountain villages.

A car can be found in bigger cities for €18 to €25 per day, usually with unlimited kilometres and insurance thrown in. Some companies allow free drop-offs in select cities in Bulgaria. See individual entries for listings.

To rent, you normally need to be 21 and have a driver's licence from your own country. Some agents drop the 20% VAT (value-added tax) if you pay in cash. In all, agents are pretty reliable. We heard from a British couple who

totalled a car and only lost their €150 deposit due to the company's losses in the time taken to replace the car.

Most road conditions are pretty good and traffic reasonably light. Most roads are well signed in Cyrillic and Roman alphabets. On smaller roads, you may have to negotiate big bumps. If oncoming cars flicks their lights, it's likely a police speed trap is around the corner (the west-bound entry to Sofia is notorious for police traps). Speed limits are well signed: usually 130km/h on main highways and 90km/h on smaller ones. Town speed limits are 50km/h unless otherwise noted.

### Train

Bulgarian trains are fun, as carriage seats expose a bit more local life than you'll get on buses. Trains – all run by the Bulgarian State Railways (BDZh) – are generally cheaper too, but take a little longer than buses. Some offer great views (including the pretty Bansko–Septemvri route). *Ekspresen* (express) and *bârz* (fast) trains way out-speed the slow *pâticheski* (passenger) trains.

All prices in the chapter are for 2nd-class seats (with eight seats per cabin); 1st-class seats (only a few leva more) have six seats per cabin, and for some routes see far fewer people.

Most Europe-wide rail passes can be purchased in Bulgaria, but will not be good value for getting around the country.

Bring what food or water you'll need for the trip. Most train stations are signposted in Cyrillic only, and no announcements are made on board.

All train stations have a left-luggage service (about 2lv per bag for 24 hours).

An extra daily train or two runs some routes in summer, particularly serving the Black Sea coast.

#### BUS & TRAIN SCHEDULES ONLINE

These websites are huge aids in planning your trip across Bulgaria:

- [http://bus.light-bg.com/english/input\\_engl.html](http://bus.light-bg.com/english/input_engl.html) – nationwide bus information
- [www.centralnaavtogara.bg](http://www.centralnaavtogara.bg) – Sofia bus information
- [www.bdzh.bg](http://www.bdzh.bg) – lists times and prices for all train routes

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