



HONEYMOON

BULGARIA

When you think 'Road trip!', you probably don't think 'Bulgaria!' but you probably should. In Europe, where many countries look like a real-life fairytale, Bulgaria is one of the fairest of them all, and although you'll have the time of your lives on the beaches of the 'Bulgarian Riviera' (Black Sea Coast), you should maximise the magic and drive some of the roads less travelled to explore picturesque villages and magnificent mountains. The following itinerary begins in capital city Sofia, where you can get your bearings at the National Archaeological Museum, National Art Gallery, National History Museum and Ivan Vazov National Theatre, then takes in the next-largest city, Plovdiv, one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. In between, you'll discover many more highlights. Just hire a car and you'll be away. And although most Bulgarians speak English well, if you need to resort to the international language of gesturing wildly, remember: in this country, 'no' is communicated with a nod of the head, and 'yes' with a side-to-side shake.





A feast for the eyes, in summer Bulgaria's fields are filled with golden sunflowers; both their oil and seeds are produced here. Stop at a street vendor for a snack of roasted seeds, or try the sunflower milk smoothie at vegan-friendly bakery and restaurant Sun Moon in Sofia.

Play: An hour and a half south of Sofia in the Rila Mountains (the Balkans' highest mountain range), the Rila Monastery is a wonder. This 10th-century UNESCO World Heritage Site is arguably Bulgaria's most popular attraction, but tourist trap or not, it's a must. Combine it with a tramp to see the enchanting Seven Rila Lakes, which you can complete in a day, or more slowly by cosying up overnight in one of several huts.

Another hour and a half south of the monastery is Bansko, at the foot of the Pirin Mountains in Pirin National Park. This winter resort town is known as a great-value place to ski, and it's also captivating in summer. Take a hike in the park to see beautiful glacial lakes and waterfalls, and Baykushev's pine, Bulgaria's oldest conifer.

Two and a half hours east of Bansko is Plovdiv, recently voted Europe's 2019 Capital of Culture. This city is awesome for all things arty and archaeological, including a restored Roman amphitheatre still in use today, and the trendy Kapana district, the bunting-strung and mural-lined laneways of which spill over with eateries, bars and boutiques. Built into the hillside two and a half hours north-east of here is Veliko Tarnovo, a hotspot for architecture of the medieval Second Bulgarian State. Go for the bridges, churches and palaces presided over by the Tsarevets fortress, which shines in the evenings when lit up by a light show and in spring when the trees break into blossom.

En route from Plovdiv to Veliko Tarnovo in Gabrovo is Etar, an ethnographic village preserved as an open-air museum. It's a real slice of life, with craftsmanship and customs on display. There are also some amazing rock formations and caves that you should put on your to-do list near here: Devetashka Peshtera by Gabrovo, with a river running through it; and Chudnite Mostove (the Wonderful Bridges) south of Plovdiv, where the brave can zipline through a hole in the rock.

Stay: Ease yourself in on arrival with a night at Sofia's designer Hotel Sense. On one of the city's main boulevards (which is also home to the National Assembly and St Nicholas Russian Church), it offers every luxury and has a cool rooftop bar. Ask for a room overlooking the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. Keen to splash out in Bansko too? Consider the five-star Kempinski Hotel Grand Arena, favoured for its alpine views,

attentive service, award-winning spa, and heated indoor and outdoor pools. Newly renovated, it's also right next to the gondola, so you can often make same-day reservations according to where the wind takes you. Add to the adventure by investigating smaller hotels and family-run inns. They may have only basic amenities but are ultra-affordable and charming. It's not uncommon for the owners themselves to pour you a cup of tea. Hotel Alafrangite in Plovdiv is one such place. In the style of a classic townhouse, it has 11 rooms and its own little restaurant. Arbanashki Han is another fortuitous find in the historic village of Arbanasi, 15 minutes from Veliko Tarnovo. Set in tranquil gardens, it accommodates guests in boutique rooms in a stone and timber home built in 1646.

Eat: A feast for the eyes, in summer Bulgaria's fields are filled with golden sunflowers; both their oil and seeds are produced here. Stop at a street vendor for a snack of roasted seeds, or try the sunflower milk smoothie at vegan-friendly bakery and restaurant Sun Moon in Sofia.

Other local fare to sample includes banitsa pastries made with egg and cheese, and mekitsa, a deep-fried yoghurt dough sprinkled with icing sugar and served with jam. Notable among the eateries in Plovdiv's Kapana district is Pavaj, a romantic spot loved for its atmosphere, where you can people-watch while sipping rakia (traditional fruit brandy) and boza (a low-alcohol malt drink), and enjoying delicious fresh food (save room for the violet cheesecake).

With its leafy courtyard and crackling fire, music-filled Obetsanova Mehana in Bansko is a good time at any time of the year. A typical tavern, be sure to taste its shopska salad made with cucumber, tomato, onion, capsicum and sirene, a Bulgarian white cheese; the shish kebab-like shashliks; and tarator, a cold cucumber soup.

In Etar, you'll find the sweetest sweet shop. Among the tempting treats it sells, seek a sugar high from the rose-scented lokum (Turkish delight), dried plum delicacy pestil, and halva made from sunflower seed butter.