



Bulgaria

Archaeology & art from prehistoric to modern

1–11 October 2027 (MN 497)

11 days

Speaker: Dr Nikola Theodossiev

A journey through over 40,000 years of human history, tracing Bulgaria's development from prehistory to the 20th century.

Six UNESCO World Heritage sites including remarkable Thracian tombs and the Boyana Church with its stunning frescoes.

Beautiful and varied landscapes provide a striking backdrop to the journey.

A country still largely untouched by mass tourism but unlikely to stay that way for long.

Variety characterises this tour, which casts light on a fascinating and little-explored region across a span of millennia. Humans first inhabited what is now Bulgaria some 45,000 years ago, and today there is much of archaeological importance to be seen, both in situ and in the country's excellent museums.

Outside the Balkan peninsula, an air of mystery surrounds the region's prehistoric and ancient past. This was a time latterly dominated by the Thracians: an enigmatic people comprising cattle herders, farmers and warriors, renowned for their love of wine and gold jewellery. Prehistoric burial sites scattered across the country illuminate their customs and culture and point towards one of Europe's earliest hierarchical societies. We visit several such tombs – remote, atmospheric and stunningly preserved – with their artefacts displayed in collections across the country. Perhaps the most spectacular discovery dates back, incredibly, to the fifth millennium BC. Recognised as the oldest gold treasure in the world, the ornaments housed in the archaeological museum in Varna on the Black Sea coast stimulated enormous international interest in 1972, yet it remains surprisingly little known.

The decline of the loose union of Thracian tribes under the Odrysian Kingdom (480 BC–AD 46) ushered in a gradual Romanisation of the area. Evidence of Thracia's importance as a Roman province is widespread throughout Bulgaria – nowhere more strikingly than in Plovdiv (ancient Philippopolis), one of the world's oldest continuously inhabited cities. Here, the Roman forum and stadium vie for attention with Ottoman mosques and the brightly painted houses of the Bulgarian



Plovdiv, bridge over the Maritsa, image ©Antiqua Print Gallery / Alamy Stock Photo

National Revival.

In more recent times, Bulgaria has emerged confidently from the post-communist haze. Sofia and Plovdiv are lively, cosmopolitan cities with a flourishing cultural scene, while the former capital of Veliko Tarnovo and the ancient Black Sea city of Nessebar hark back to an illustrious past. Taken together, this tour offers a complete and rewarding introduction to a country whose cultural depth is only now beginning to receive wider recognition.

Itinerary

Day 1: Sofia. Morning flight (British Airways) from London Heathrow to Sofia. After settling into the hotel, there is an introductory lecture and dinner. First of three nights in Sofia.

Day 2: Sofia. Morning visit to the church of St Sofia, from which the city takes its name, which is an outstanding example of Early Christian architecture. The vast Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, built 1882–1912, follows this architectural tradition. The well-preserved remains of the Roman city (Serdica) are

entwined with the subway system under the shadow of the former Communist Party headquarters.

Day 3: Sofia. In the morning visit the UNESCO-listed medieval Boyana Church with its incredible 13th-century frescoes. The Archaeological Museum has an impressive collection including Thracian treasure housed in the city's oldest and largest former Ottoman mosque. The afternoon is free for independent exploration.

Day 4: Rila monastery, Plovdiv. Drive south into the scenic Rila mountains to the eponymous monastery. Built on the site of its medieval predecessor, which was destroyed by fire, Rila is a spectacular example of Bulgarian National Revival architecture and a UNESCO World Heritage site. Lunch near Rila before journeying through forest, mountains and across plains to Plovdiv. First of three nights in Plovdiv.

Day 5: Plovdiv. Walking tour of the remains of ancient Philippopolis: the forum, stadium and

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continued

theatre, which ranks among the best-preserved ancient theatres in the world, with the Rhodope mountains as its dramatic backdrop. See also the remains of the Episcopal Basilica, the largest early Christian temple in Bulgaria. After lunch walk through the National Revival quarter. Brightly painted and highly decorative, the architecture reflects the ambition of the emerging middle class which flourished in the early 1800s after liberation from Ottoman rule. There is time to visit the archaeological museum.

Day 6: Kazanlak. Leave Plovdiv for Kazanlak in the so-called Valley of the Thracian Kings, a region where more than a thousand tumuli are to be found and over twenty monumental Thracian tombs have been unearthed. Visit one of the most elaborate: the Tomb of Seuthes III, fourth-century BC ruler of the Odrysian Kingdom, whose bronze head is displayed in Sofia's archaeological museum. The Thracian Tomb of Kazanlak with its painted ceiling is considered one of the masterpieces of the Hellenistic period in Bulgaria. Visit the full-size replica (to preserve the paintings, the tomb is not open to the public).

Day 7: Nessebar, Varna. Travel to the Black Sea coast and the ancient city of Nessebar. Situated on a rocky peninsula, the city is described by UNESCO as 'an outstanding testimony of multilayered cultural and historical heritage.' Many civilisations left their mark on the city, with archaeological structures from the second millennium BC to the Middle Ages. Continue to Varna, where two nights are spent.

Day 8: Varna. Bulgaria's third city has been one of the Black Sea's major ports for over 2,000 years and was an important Roman and Byzantine staging post. Visit the archaeological museum with its glorious collection of gold jewellery from the nearby necropolis dating back to the fifth millennium BC. In the afternoon visit the largest Roman remains in the country: the thermae of Odessus, a sizeable complex with a brick tower built in the middle of the second century.

Day 9: Madara, Sveshtari, Veliko Tarnovo. The Madara Rider is a unique relief carved into a 100m-high cliff, created during the early years of the formation of the First Bulgarian Empire, at the beginning of the eighth century. After lunch, drive to the remote village of Sveshtari where a third-century BC tomb was discovered in 1982. Ten female figures carved in high relief on the walls of the central chamber are the

only examples of their kind found so far in the Thracian lands. Continue to the former capital of Veliko Tarnovo for the first of two nights.

Day 10: Arbanasi, Veliko Tarnovo. Visit the charming village of Arbanasi, including a traditional house and the Church of the Nativity with richly coloured 17th-century frescoes. Back in Veliko Tarnovo visit Tsaravets fortress, used in the Second Bulgarian Empire from 1185 to 1393. Razed to the ground by the Ottomans in the 14th century, rebuilding began in the 1930s. Its hilltop location provides a wonderful vantage point from which to survey the Old Town. Lunch here before a guided walk through the narrow streets.

Day 11: Nicopolis ad Istrum, Sofia. Visit Nicopolis ad Istrum, the ruins of a Roman and Early Byzantine town, before lunch in Pravets en route to Sofia. Back in Sofia, visit the National History Museum, in the former primary residence of the dictator and last communist leader, Todor Zhivkov. Fly to London Heathrow, arriving in the evening.

Lecturer

Dr Nikola Theodossiev. Associate Professor of Archaeology at Sofia University. He has published many articles and a book on Ancient Thrace. He is a member of the Archaeological Institute of America, Honorary Member of Associazione Internazionale di Archeologia Classica, Member of the Society of Fellows of the American Academy in Rome and has held fellowships at several institutions, including Oxford University, and the National Gallery of Art in Washington.

Practicalities

Included: travel by private coach; hotel accommodation as described below; breakfasts; 8 lunches and 7 dinners with wine, water, coffee; all admissions; all tips; all taxes; the services of the lecturer and tour manager.

Accommodation. **Balkan Palace Hotel, Sofia** (sofiabalkanpalace.com): 5-star hotel excellently located in the city centre. **DoubleTree by Hilton, Plovdiv** (hilton.com): modern 4-star hotel located in the centre of Plovdiv. **Rosslyn Dimyat Hotel, Varna** (dimyat.rosslyn-hotels.com): well-located business hotel overlooking Varna Bay. **Grand Hotel, Veliko Tarnovo** (grandhotelvt.com): newly renovated

4-star hotel overlooking the Old Town. *Single rooms throughout are doubles or twins for sole use.*

How strenuous? The tour involves a lot of walking in town centres, where coach access is restricted, and a lot of standing in museums and churches. Uneven ground and irregular paving are standard. A good level of fitness is essential. You will be on your feet for lengthy stretches of time. There are some long coach journeys. Average distance by coach per day: 87 miles.

Group size: typically between 10 and 24 participants.