

Below is the proposed itinerary for the trip. As is true on any adventure travel trip, plans for any specific day may be modified due to weather considerations, unforeseen circumstances, new opportunities, and group interests.

**DAY 1**

**Arrive Sofia, Introductions and Welcome Dinner**

Plan to arrive any time before 3:30PM. today. Our hotel, the Crystal Palace, is one of the nicest in Sofia and is located right near the city center, a short walk to the Nevski Cathedral and other historic sites. If you arrive before your room is ready, you can leave your luggage and go out for a walk - despite the different alphabet, Sofia is an easy city to navigate. We'll plan to meet at our hotel at 5:30PM for a welcome and introductions. At 6:30PM we'll meet up with our Bulgarian guide for the first of many delicious dinners together. (D)

Overnight Sofia

**DAY 2**

**Guided tour of Sofia, Transfer to and Tour of Plovdiv**

After breakfast we'll go for a guided tour of Sofia, the capital city. The city is an interesting mix of the old and venerable, and new and tacky. Our tour will include some of the most famous sites, such as the Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. After checking out of the hotel and eating a picnic lunch, we set off east, making our way through the Thracian Plain to Plovdiv, Bulgaria's second major city. Plovdiv is the oldest continuously inhabited city in Europe, with a history going back over 8000 years. After dropping off our bags, we'll explore the city on foot. Our guide will show us old Plovdiv with its many churches, museums, old-style houses, and ancient theater, followed by dinner in the heart of the city. Tonight, we'll stay in a hotel short walk from the old part of town. (B, L, D)

Overnight Plovdiv

**DAY 3**

**Visit Bachkovo Monastery, Hike in Nature Reserve, Transfer to Smolyanski Ezera.**

Today we leave cities behind and head for the hills! We head south, making our way via the Chepelarska Gorge to the Rodopi Mountains. Our first stop is the Bachkovo Monastery, the second largest in Bulgaria. Founded in 1083, the monastery is known for the unique combination of Byzantine, Caucasian, and Bulgarian culture, united by the common faith. Its most remarkable feature is the frescoes that are seen everywhere. As well as looking around the monastery, we will also walk in the beautiful valley behind it. At the edge of a botanic reserve, there are several interesting chapels tucked away in the forest.

After a picnic lunch we drive into the heart of the Rodopi Mountains, stopping off at the picturesque village of Shiroka Luka, famous for its traditional architecture. From there we complete our transfer to Smolyanski Ezera (Smolyan Lakes), a small mountain resort situated above the town of Smolyan. (B, L, D)

Hiking: 3.1 miles or 2 hours, 600-foot elevation gain and loss.

Overnight Smolyanski Ezera (Smolyan Lakes)

**DAY 4**

**Hike in Rodopi Mountains, Ridge of Perelik Massive and Gela Village. Transfer to Yagodina.**

The Rodopi Mountains are their most beautiful in the spring, and on our hike today, we will get to see the mountains in all of their glory. We begin the day with a wonderful panoramic hike along the main ridge of the Perelik Massif. Throughout our hike, we will see blooming wildflowers, meandering rivers, and vistas for miles. We skirt just below the summit of the Rodopi's highest peak, Mt. Golyam Perelik (7100ft), before ascending Mt. Golyam Snezhnik (7178ft) just two meters lower! We can enjoy a well-deserved lunch and rest on the summit of Mt. Golyam Snezhnik before descending to the picturesque village of Gela. Our bus will meet us in Gela, and we will drive to our hotel in Yagodina for dinner. (B, L, D)

Hiking: 9.3 miles or 5 - 6 hours, 1000 foot elevation gain, 3,400 foot loss.

Overnight Yagodina

**DAY 5**

**Hike in Buynovo Gorge and visit Yagodina Cave, transfer to Devil's Throat Cave and hike back to Yagodina**

This is a region of karst limestone and today we'll explore its glories- caves, gorges, and beautiful rock formations. We'll start with an hour's walk right out of our hotel, through the forest and down into Buynovo Gorge and Yagodina Cave. This cave is one of the most spectacular in the country with numerous stalagmites, stalactites, and other unusual cave formations. Part of the cave also contains a fascinating prehistoric dwelling that still preserves a selection of original artifacts. Meeting our bus, we then drive round into the neighboring Trigrad Gorge and our second cave, known as The Devil's Throat. This takes the form of an enormous cavern into which drops a thundering waterfall. It is here that the legendary Thracian musician Orpheus is said to have emerged from the Underworld after a failed attempt to rescue his wife Eurydice. After we emerge from the cave, we'll walk back to Yagodina through the beautiful karst limestone region, famed for its amazingly rich flora that include many endemic species. (B, L, D)

Hiking: 1.9 and 4.3 miles, 3 - 4 hours total, 635-foot elevation gain, 1,450-foot loss.

Overnight Yagodina

**DAY 6**

**Buynovska Valley, Village of Buynovo, Hiking Green Border of Greece.**

A half hour drive up the picturesque Buynovska valley brings us to the village of Buynovo where we will start our walk. Our hike today will wander through the mountain meadows and forests close up to the border with Greece. During the Cold War period, this region was known as the 'Zone of Death', as it was a forbidden region patrolled by armed border guards ordered to prevent anyone trying to escape across the Iron Curtain into Greece. Remnants of the old border fence can still be seen. Thankfully today it is a peaceful region, roamed by wolves and bears which can now once again disperse freely between the two countries. (B, L, D)

Hiking: 8.7 miles or 3 - 4 hours, 1,300-foot elevation gain, 1,800-foot loss.

Overnight Yagodina



**DAY 7**

**Mount Sveti Iliya, Trigrad Gorge, Transfer to Leshten**

Leaving directly from the hotel, we begin our ascent of Mount Sveti Iliya (4,947 feet), a dramatic limestone peak that rises up directly above the village. Although a steep and stony zig-zag climb, the effort is worth it, as we are rewarded by panoramic views that not only stretch out over the village itself, but indeed over much of the Western Rodopi Mountains. From the summit, we make a long descent into the depths of the Trigrad Gorge, where we meet up with our bus for a picturesque drive west through the Rodopi Mountains. We spend the night in the tiny village of Leshten, an architectural reserve famed for its vernacular architecture that has only recently been reclaimed. (B, L, D)

Hiking: 6.2 miles or 3 - 4 hours, 1,315-foot elevation gain, 1,950-foot loss.

Overnight Leshten

**DAY 8**

**Hike in Kanina Valley, Home-cooked Lunch, Transfer to Melnik**

Leaving Leshten on foot, we have a gentle morning walk descending downstream along another wonderful panoramic trail, following the flank of the Kanina valley. Arriving at a small spa resort at the mouth of the gorge, there will be time for a refreshing swim in one of the mineral water pools, before making our way to a nearby Bulgarian Muslim village. Here we will be welcomed by some of the local women and treated to a home-cooked lunch, followed by a chance to learn about their traditional handicrafts, customs, and folk music. Later in the afternoon, we drive across the southern Pirin Mountains via the Popovi Livadi pass to arrive in Melnik, the smallest and perhaps most beautiful town in Bulgaria, stunningly set in an amazing sandstone gorge. It is more reminiscent of Greece than other parts of Bulgaria, not surprising when you realize how close we are to the Greece border here. Here we will be based for the next two nights at Hotel 'Melnik', perfectly located on the flank of the cliffs overlooking the town. (B, L, D)

Hiking: 3.7 miles or 3 hours, 1,165-foot elevation loss.

Overnight Melnik

**DAY 9**

**Explore Rozhen Monastery, Remote Village of Zlatolist, Hike Ancient Trail to Melnik**

After breakfast, we take a short drive to the Rozhen Monastery. This is one of the most picturesque and tranquil in Bulgaria and one of the few Bulgarian monasteries from the Middle Ages which has survived relatively intact up to present days. Having looked round the monastery, we set off on foot from the hotel, following a dirt road down a dry valley to the remote village of Zlatolist. Here we can visit an interesting church that is connected with the fascinating life history of a famous local prophethess. Continuing our walk, we follow an ancient pilgrims' trail that threads its way over a sandstone ridge back to Melnik. The remainder of the afternoon and evening will be left free for you to explore this very engaging and picturesque town. (B, L)

Hiking: 6.8 miles or 3 - 4 hours, 560-foot elevation gain, 1,525 -foot loss.

Overnight Melnik

DAY 10

Hike Sveti Nikola, UNESCO World Heritage Rila Monastery. Transfer to Sofia.

We begin the day with an optional early morning hike on the Sveti Nikola elevation above Melnik where there are ruins of several churches and monasteries as well as an old fortress. The hill also offers superb views over the surrounding region. Leaving Melnik we travel north up the Struma Valley, and then cut back east into the heart of the Rila mountains. Here we will visit the Rila Monastery and hermitage of Saint John of Rila. This is a UNESCO World Heritage site and is beautifully located beneath the Rila Mountains highest peaks. Aside from the sheer beauty of the many icons, Rila's importance stems from its role as a repository of Bulgarian culture during the different periods that Bulgaria has been dominated by other countries.

We'll start with a visit to the hermitage of Saint John of Rila and have the opportunity to purify ourselves as we climb out a tunnel from his cave (this is optional). We then take a short walk in the surrounding Rila Monastery Nature Park to the monastery itself. We'll take time to look at the many icons and soak up the atmosphere of the monastery itself. Later in the afternoon, we transfer to Sofia for our final night. (B, L, D)

Hiking: Nikola - 2.5 miles or 90 minutes, 450-foot elevation gain and loss.

Hiking Rila Monastery - 2.5 miles or 90 minutes, 600-foot elevation gain, 300-foot loss.

Overnight Sofia

DAY 11

Tour ends after breakfast.

Sadly, we say farewell after breakfast. We'll have you back to the Sofia airport by 11 a.m for flights out after 1 p.m. (B)