

Sofia СОФИЯ



By far Bulgaria's biggest city, Sofia (So-fia) is one of Europe's most compact and walkable capital cities, although it's still one of the least known by foreign travellers. It's usually bypassed by tourists heading to the coast or the ski resorts, but they're missing out on something special. Sofia has a young and dynamic vibe, like a city waking up after decades of slumber, and is becoming a confident and cosmopolitan European capital. The old east-meets-west feel is still here, with a scattering of onion-domed churches, Ottoman mosques and Red Army monuments topped with air-punching Soviet soldiers, but these days they share the skyline with glitzy shopping malls, five-star hotels and the best bars and clubs the country has to offer.

Although no grand metropolis, Sofia is nevertheless an attractive and cultured city with plenty to keep you busy for several days or more. Museums, art galleries, theatres, fine restaurants, they're all here. Sofia is also a surprisingly green city, with huge swaths of parkland within the city boundaries and the ski slopes and hiking trails of mighty Mt Vitosha right on the doorstep.

The city has certainly developed quickly over recent years and a new affluence is apparent in the trendy international boutiques, upmarket hotels and less savoury casinos and flashy cars with blacked-out windows, but there are also great inequalities. Hard-up pensioners and disabled people begging on the street are, sadly, not an uncommon sight, but most Sofians have hope for the future of their city as one of the EU's newest capitals.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Golden glow**
Cast an eye over the stunning Thracian treasures on display at the Archaeological Museum (p91)
- **Woodland wandering**
Escape the crowds and get lost in the wilds of Yuzhen Park (p92)
- **Magnificent murals**
Ponder eternity amongst the sacred artwork of the medieval Boyana Church (p108)
- **Up the workers**
Get close to more recent history at the towering Monument to the Soviet Army (p92)
- **Engage your brain**
Join the locals in a competitive game of chess in the City Garden (p90)



■ TELEPHONE CODE: 02

■ POPULATION: 1.3 MILLION

HISTORY

The Thracian Serdi tribe settled the Sofia region as far back as the 8th century BC, and the area was briefly occupied by the Macedonians in the 4th century BC. However, the city as we know it today was founded by the Romans, who conquered the region in AD 29 and built the town of Ulpia Serdica. In the late 3rd century AD, Serdica became a major regional imperial capital, reaching a zenith in the early 4th century under Emperor Constantine the Great. The Sveti Georgi Rotunda is the most prominent reminder of the Roman era still standing.

The Bulgar king Khan Krum swung by in AD 809 and made it one of the main towns of his empire. The Byzantines occupied it in the 11th century, and it was during the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185–1396) that the name of the city was changed (for the last time) to Sofia, after the Church of Sveta Sofia, which still stands, albeit much rebuilt. Sadly, few monuments survive from this crucial period; the most important, and most precious to all Bulgarians, is the lovely Boyana Church.

The Ottomans, sweeping through the Balkans, captured the city in 1382, and held it for nearly 500 years. Sofia became the regional capital and a major market town. The Ottomans built baths and mosques, such as the Banya Bashi Mosque, but many churches were destroyed or abandoned; the tiny Church of Sveta Petka Samardjiiska is a very rare survivor.

The city declined during the feudal unrest of the mid-19th century, and it was in Sofia that the celebrated anti-Turkish rebel Vasil Levski was hanged in 1873, after first being interrogated and tortured in the building that later became the Royal Palace. After the liberation of the city from the Turks in early 1878, Sofia officially became the capital of Bulgaria on 4 April 1879. The new roads and railway lines linking Sofia with the rest of Europe and the Balkans soon boosted the city's fortunes. However, Bulgaria picked the wrong side during WWII so, tragically, much of the city's heritage was destroyed during bombing raids.

The Red Army 'liberated' Sofia in 1944 – the monument (p92) to their arrival still soars near Borisova Gradina – and a People's Republic was set up after the war. Socialist architects set to work in the following years, rebuilding the heavily damaged city on the

Soviet model, complete with high-rise housing blocks in the suburbs and monstrous monuments in the city centre, such as the old Party House which dominates pl Nezavisimost. Some of the more distasteful reminders of the communist era, such as the mausoleum of postwar leader Georgi Dimitrov, have been swept away, while others have been allowed to slowly decay since the fall of the communist government in 1989.

High unemployment and declining living standards blighted the 1990s, but while serious problems still exist, EU membership in 2007 does seem to have brought a new dynamism and sense of stability to the city, which is experiencing something of a building boom. As more international companies set up offices, and more foreign citizens choose to settle here, it's a trend that looks set to continue.

ORIENTATION

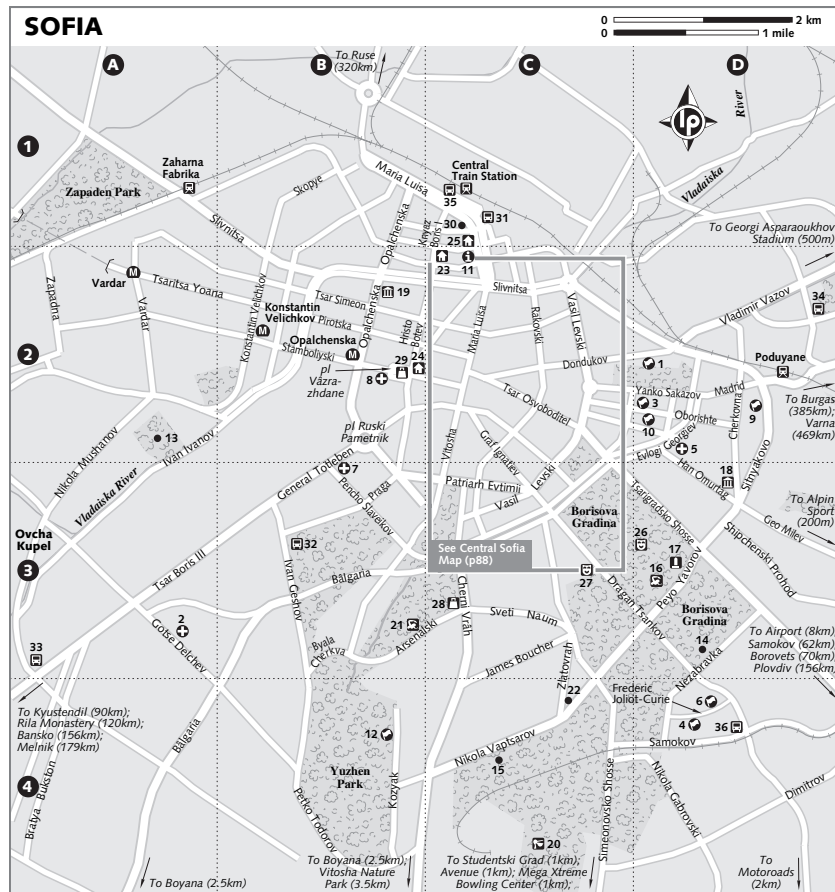
At the heart of Sofia is pl Sveta Nedelya, dominated by the great cathedral of the same name. To the north, bul Maria Luisa runs past the Central Hali Shopping Centre and the Banya Bashi Mosque towards the central train and bus stations. To the south, bul Vitosha, Sofia's partly pedestrianised main shopping street, heads towards the National Palace of Culture (NDK) and on to Yuzhen Park.

East of pl Sveta Nedelya you'll come upon pl Nezavisimost (also known as The Largo) and bul Tsar Osvoboditel, watched over by the former Royal Palace. Continuing down bul Tsar Osvoboditel, you'll pass pl Narodno Sabranie and the parliament building on the way to the huge park of Borisova Gradina.

See p107 for details on getting to and from the airport.

Maps

The *Sofia City Map* (1:19,000), published by Domino, and Datamap's *Sofia City Plan* (1:20,000), both printed in English, are widely available. The *Sofia City Info Guide* (see p85) also includes a good tourist map of the city centre. All bookshops listed in the next section sell maps of Sofia and other places in Bulgaria, as do stalls at pl Slaveikov. One of the best sources of maps, especially for hiking, is **Odyseia-In** (Map p88; ☎ 989 0538; www.odysseia-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stamboliyski 20-V); also see p86.



INFORMATION

Bookshops

Booktrading (Map p88; ☎ 981 0448; ul Graf Ignatiev 15; ☎ 8.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8pm Sun) Stocks a fair selection of English-language novels as well as books on Bulgarian history, cuisine and topics of general interest.

Helikon (Map p88; ☎ 987 1919; bul Patriarh Evtimii 68; ☎ 9.30am-8.30pm Mon-Sat, 10am-8.30pm Sun) Welcoming modern bookshop selling a good range of English-language fiction plus books on Bulgaria in various languages.

Knigomaniya (Map p84; ☎ 980 5214; 3rd fl, Mall of Sofia, bul Stamboliyski 101) Has a good stock of English-language fiction and nonfiction, plus maps, guidebooks and tourist-oriented books on Bulgaria. It also sells magazines and Bulgarian pop-music CDs.

Open-Air Bookmarket (Map p88; pl Slaveikov) Dozens of bookstalls crowd this square daily, selling mostly Bulgarian novels and technical manuals, but plenty of books on Bulgarian history, culture and cuisine are available in foreign languages, as well as some second-hand English novels.

Cultural Centres

American Cultural Center (Map p84; ☎ 937 5306; ul Kozyak 16; ☎ 2-5pm Tue-Fri)

British Council (Map p88; ☎ 942 4344; www.britishcouncil.org/bulgaria; ul Krakra 7; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri)

French Cultural Institute (Map p88; ☎ 937 7922; www.institutfrance.bg; ul Dyakon Ignatiy 2; ☎ 11am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-1pm Sat)

Goethe Institute (Map p88; ☎ 939 0100; ul Budapeshta 1; ☎ 9am-noon & 3-5pm Mon-Fri)

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Emergency

Ambulance (☎ 150)

Fire (☎ 160)

Mountain Rescue (Aleko ☎ 967 455; Cherni Vrah ☎ 967 1128)

Police (☎ 166)

Traffic Police (☎ 866 5060)

Internet Access

BTC Centre (Map p88; ul General Gurko; per hr 0.80 lv; ☎ 24hr) Offers several computers in a modern, office-style environment.

Bulgaria-Korea Internet Plaza (Map p88; NDK Underpass; 45mins 0.30 lv, per hr thereafter 1.60 lv; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Fri) Probably the cheapest internet centre in Sofia, with a dozen or so computers.

Site Internet Cafe (Map p88; ☎ 986 0896; bul Vitosha 45; per hr 3 lv; ☎ 24hr) One of the more central and more reliable internet centres, with a nonsmoking room. Insomniacs can take advantage of the all-night rate (from 10.30pm to 8.30am) of 10 lv, which includes a soft drink and a coffee.

Internet Resources

www.easysofia.com Information about hotels, restaurants, clubs, bars and more.

www.programata.bg Comprehensive eating, drinking and clubbing information.

www.sofia.bg Official municipal website, with business information.

www.sofiacityguide.com Website of the invaluable *Sofia City Info Guide* (right).

www.sofia-life.com Bar and restaurant reviews, plus details of some shops and attractions.

Media

Programata (www.programata.bg; free) A useful, widely available weekly listings magazine, with details of cinemas, restaurants and clubs. It's only in Bulgarian, but the website is in English.

Sofia City Info Guide (free) An excellent source of information, published monthly. It includes basic practical information and reviews of hotels, restaurants, clubs and shops. It's available at hotel reception desks and some travel agencies.

Sofia Echo (www.sofiaecho.com; 2.40 lv) An English-language newspaper published each Friday and available at some central newsstands. Mainly aimed at the expat business community, it also has restaurant and entertainment reviews useful for visitors.

Sofia In Your Pocket (free) Another handy quarterly magazine, with eating, sleeping and sightseeing reviews and practical information on the city.

Sofia – The Insider's Guide (free) A pleasingly opinionated quarterly publication featuring background information and advice for visitors, as well as restaurant and entertainment reviews. Available at some hotels and travel agencies.

Medical Services

Apteka Sveta Nedelya (Map p88; ☎ 987 5089; pl Sveta Nedelya 5; ☎ 24hr) Pharmacy.

Dento (Map p84; ☎ 958 4841; www.dento-bg.com; ul Atanasov 11) English-, French- and Italian-speaking dentists.

International Medical Centre (Map p84; ☎ 944 9326; ul Gogol 28) The IMC has English- and French-speaking doctors who will make house calls at any time. It also deals with paediatrics and dental care.

Pirogov Hospital (Map p84; ☎ 915 4411; bul Gen Totleben 21) Sofia's main public hospital for emergencies.

Poliklinika Torax (Map p84; ☎ 91 285; www.thorax.bg; bul Stamboliyski 57) A competent, privately run clinic with English-speaking staff.

Money

The Foreign Exchange Office has numerous outlets on bul Vitosha, bul Maria Luisa and bul Stamboliyski.

SOFIA IN...

One Day

Head straight to Sofia's most impressive sight, the **Aleksander Nevski Memorial Church** (p91). While you're there, visit the Aleksander Nevski Crypt to see the colourful Museum of Icons. Carry on to **Borisova Gradina** (p92) for a leisurely stroll among the trees, and cast an eye over Sofia's socialist past at the **Monument to the Soviet Army** (p92) on the way. In the evening, drop by **Pri Kmeta** (p102) for a beer or two.

Three Days

Follow the above itinerary, and on the second day admire the treasures on show at the **Archaeological Museum** (p91) and the **National Art Gallery** (p90). On the next day, relax in **Yuzhen Park** (p92) and have a meal at the excellent **Manastirska Magernitsa** (p101).

One Week

After the above itinerary, go to Boyana to see the **National Museum of History** (p108) and the lovely **Boyana Church** (p108). Take a look round the **National Museum of Military History** (p94) and take a day trip out to **Koprivshitsa** (p191).

Biochim Commercial Bank (Map p88; ul Alabin)
Unicredit Bulbank (Map p88; cnr ul Lavele & ul Todor Alexandrov)

United Bulgarian Bank (Map p88; ul Sveta Sofia)

Post

Central Post Office (Map p88; ul General Gurko 6;
 ☎ 7.30am-8.30pm)

Telephone

BTC Centre (Map p88; ul General Gurko; ☎ 24hr)
 Modern communications centre run by the Bulgarian Telecommunications Company, with booths for local and international calls and internet access.

Toilets

Central Hali Shopping Centre (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa; admission free)

NDK Underpass (Map p88; Yuzhen Park; admission 0.30 lv)

Public Toilets (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa; admission 0.40 lv)
 Beside Banya Bashi Mosque.

Tsum Retail Centre (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa; admission free)

Tourist Information

National Tourist Information Centre (Map p88;
 ☎ 987 9778; www.bulgariatravel.org; ul Sveta Sofia;
 ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) Bright modern tourist office with helpful, English-speaking staff and glossy brochures for destinations around Bulgaria.

Zig Zag Holidays (Map p88; ☎ 980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V, enter from ul Lavele;
 ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Although essentially a

private travel agency, Zig Zag is happy to provide tourist information, and sells a range of maps and books. It charges a reasonable 5 lv for detailed consultations, though this fee is deducted if you book a tour (eg hiking or climbing) or accommodation with the agency.

Travel Agencies

Alexander Tour (Map p88; ☎ /fax 983 3322; www.alexandertour.com; ul Pop Bogomil 44) An upmarket outfit offering numerous tours all over Bulgaria, including bird-watching, archaeology and wine tours.

Balkan Tourist (Map p88; ☎ 986 5849; www.balkan.tourist.bg; bul Tsar Osvoboditel 4) Inside the old Bulgaria Grand Hotel, this efficient agency books domestic and international air tickets.

Odyssea-In Travel Agency (Map p88; ☎ 989 0538; www.odyssea-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stamboliyski 20-V, enter from ul Lavele) Odyssea-In can book you on hiking, skiing, climbing, bird-watching and numerous other trips across the country. It deals with groups; individuals should contact Zig Zag Holidays (left) on the ground floor of the same building.

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

The main danger you are likely to face in Sofia comes from the often dreadful traffic; pedestrian crossings and traffic lights don't mean much to many drivers, so be extra careful when crossing roads. Note that traffic lanes and pedestrian areas are marked only by faint painted lines on the cobbles around pl Aleksander Nevski and pl Narodno Sabranie, and although a large section of bul Vitosha is now off-limits to private cars, you should still

watch out for trams and for vehicles zipping out of the side streets.

As always, be careful with bags, wallets and purses on crowded public transport and particularly in busy areas such as the Ladies' Market and pl Sveta Nedelya.

SIGHTS

Most of Sofia's sights are handily located in the compact city centre, and you won't have to do too much walking to get round them all. Further afield, the suburb of Boyana (p108) is the location of the city's biggest museum and its most revered church.

Around Ploshtad Sveta Nedelya**SVETA NEDELYA CATHEDRAL**

This magnificent domed **church** (Map p88; pl Sveta Nedelya) is one of the city's major landmarks. Built between 1856 and 1863 on the foundations of several older churches, the cathedral's interior is covered with rich, Byzantine-style murals of saints. A glass case to the right of the iconostasis holds the body of Sveti Kral Stefan Milotin, a medieval king of Serbia, wrapped in a velvet robe. The bones are said to have miraculous healing powers. A small plaque near the southern entrance explains, in English, how the cathedral was blown up by communists on 16 April 1925 in an attempt to assassinate Tsar Boris III. Over 120 people were killed in the attack, including most of the cabinet, but Boris escaped unharmed.

SOFIA MONUMENT

Erected in 2001 on the site where a gigantic statue of Lenin once stood, this 24m-high **monument** (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa) was created as a new civic symbol for the city. The bronze female figure at the top of the column, holding the wreath of victory in her right hand and balancing an owl on her left arm, represents Sofia, personification of wisdom and fate.

North of Ploshtad Sveta Nedelya**SVETA PETKA SAMARDJIJSKA CHURCH**

This tiny **church** (Map p88; admission 2 lv; ☎ 7am-6pm) is incongruously located in the underpass below the Tsum Retail Centre. Named in honour of St Peter of the Saddlers, the church was built during the early years of Ottoman rule (late 14th century), which explains its sunken profile and inconspicuous exterior. Inside there

are some 16th-century murals, but nothing is explained in any language. It's rumoured that the Bulgarian freedom fighter and national icon Vasil Levski is buried here.

MINERAL BATHS

The **Mineral Baths** (Map p88; ul Triaditsa) – also known as the Turkish Baths – was built between 1911 and 1913. With its elegant striped façade and ceramic decorations recalling the designs of Nesebâr's medieval churches, it's one of Sofia's architectural gems, but it fell into dereliction in the 1990s and has been undergoing sporadic restoration for over a decade. When restoration is finally complete, it will house a new civic museum, although no date has been set for this. The centrepiece of the little square between the baths and the Banya Bashi Mosque, known as pl Banski, is a modern fountain, while a smart **drinking-fountain complex** has been constructed just behind the baths, where locals fill up their bottles with free streaming mineral water.

BANYA BASHI MOSQUE

Sofia's only working **mosque** (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa) was built in 1576 by the celebrated Ottoman architect Kodja Mimar Sinan, who also designed the Selim II Mosque in Edirne, Turkey. It's certainly an eye-catching edifice and the red brick minaret makes a convenient landmark. At the rear of the building is a small, recently excavated section of the bathhouse that once joined onto the mosque and a hot-water drinking fountain. Visitors are welcome outside prayer times if modestly dressed.

SOFIA SYNAGOGUE

Sofia's grand **synagogue** (Map p88; ☎ 983 1273; www.sofiasynagogue.com; ul Ekzarh Yosif 16) was designed in a flamboyant Moorish style by the Austrian architect Friedrich Gruenanger, and was consecrated in 1909. Built to accommodate up to 1170 worshippers, it is the largest Sephardic synagogue in Europe, and its 2250kg brass chandelier is the biggest in Bulgaria. However, visitors are only admitted if invited or of the Jewish faith.

NATIONAL POLYTECHNIC MUSEUM

One of Sofia's less visited attractions, this small **museum** (Map p84; ☎ 931 3004; ul Opalchenska 66; admission 3 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Mon-Fri) is nevertheless



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TRANSPORT

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a treasure trove for anyone interested in the history of science and technology. On show is a varied (though not always well labelled) collection covering such subjects as photography, radio and time measurement. A gleaming, perfectly restored 1928

Ford Model A is parked just inside, while other displays include atomic clocks, typewriters, early movie cameras and mechanical pianos. Look for the Bulgarian-made freeze-dried 'space food', which includes a packet of powdered tarator.

Around Ploshad Battenberg

ROYAL PALACE

Originally built as the headquarters of the Ottoman police force, it was at the **palace** (Map p88; pl Battenberg 1) that Bulgaria's national hero, Vasil Levski, was tried and tortured before his public execution in 1873. After the Liberation, the building was remodelled in Viennese style and in 1887, apparently undeterred by its grisly recent past, Prince Alexander Battenberg moved in and it became the official residence of Bulgaria's royal family until the communist takeover. These days it houses the National Art Gallery and the Ethnographical Museum, while the shaded park at the rear contains an odd assemblage of statues.

Occupying the east wing of the palace, the **National Art Gallery** (☎ 980 3325; admission 4 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue, Wed & Fri-Sun, to 7pm Thu) holds one of the country's most comprehensive collections of Bulgarian art, with several galleries full of mainly 19th- and 20th-century paintings and sculptures. All the big names are represented, including the ubiquitous Vladimir Dimitrov, whose orange, Madonna-like *Harvester* hangs in the former royal music room. Other standouts include Goshka Datsov's *The Dream of Mary Magdalene* and Georgi Mashev's creepy *Outcast*. Anton Mitov's paintings of early-20th-century Sofia, such as *Vegetable Market at Sofia*, offer a fascinating insight into local history. On the floor above, a warren of corridors and small rooms forms a display space for Bulgarian sculpture, featuring marble, bronze and terracotta portraits by Ivan Lazarov, Vaska Emmanouilova and Andrei Nikolov, whose marble head, *Yearning*, is among the highlights.

Spread over two floors, the **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 987 4191; admission 3 lv, guided tour 10 lv; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun) has a permanent collection of regional costumes and crafts, although most of the space is usually occupied by long-term temporary exhibitions on topics of varying interest, such as traditional festivals, carpet-making, or, as was the case through 2007, provincial bread stamps. (Everything is captioned in English.) Some rooms are in poor condition, but others, with their marble fireplaces, mirrors and ornate plasterwork, are worth pausing over; note the lobster, fish and dead duck on the ceiling of what was once presumably a royal dining room.

The exit from the museum leads directly into the Centre of Folk Arts & Crafts souvenir shop (p105).

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

You can almost sense the ghosts of generations of school parties dutifully trooping through the musty halls of this old-fashioned **museum** (Map p88; ☎ 987 4195; ul Tsar Osvoboditel 1; admission 2 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm). The didactic collection of animal, plant and mineral specimens is vast, although there's little labelling in anything but Bulgarian. Rocks, crystals and minerals grace the ground floor, while on the next two floors you can browse cases full of stuffed birds and animals, including a brown bear dangling a Nazi hunting medal from its claw and some threadbare apes, lions and tigers. Pickled fish and cases of dried insects complete the collection.

SVETI NIKOLAI RUSSIAN CHURCH

This gorgeous **church** (Map p88; ul Tsar Osvoboditel; ☎ 7.45am-6.30pm) with its glittering mosaic exterior was built between 1912 and 1914 for Sofia's Russian community, and named in honour of St Nikolai, the 'miracle worker'. Like the Aleksander Nevski Church, the design is strongly influenced by Russian architecture, most notably in its five golden onion domes. The surprisingly cramped interior features colourful murals and icons painted between the 11th and 14th centuries. Bishop Serafim (1881-1950), one of Bulgaria's most revered spiritual leaders, lies entombed in the crypt (accessed by a separate door to the left of the main entrance). Sitting in a flower-filled garden, the church is one of the most photographed sites in the capital.

SOFIA CITY GARDEN

Take a break from pounding the city streets and rest up in this leafy **garden** (Map p88), with its cafés, swings, flowerbeds and lovely fountain, where old men gather to play chess. Until its sudden and unceremonious demolition in 1999, the mausoleum of Bulgaria's first communist ruler, Georgi Dimitrov, squatted at the northern end of the park facing the Royal Palace. It has since been replaced by some shrubbery.

SOFIA MUNICIPAL GALLERY OF ART

Originally built as a casino, this chunky building at the southern end of the City

Garden is now an avant-garde **art gallery** (Map p88; ☎ 987 2181; ul General Gurko 1; admission free; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sat, 11am-5pm Sun). It stages rotating exhibitions of mostly contemporary Bulgarian and international art over two floors.

ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM

The Buyuk Djami (Great Mosque), with its nine lead-covered domes, was built in 1496, and since 1899 it has housed Sofia's fascinating **Archaeological Museum** (Map p88; ☎ 988 2406; ul Saborna 2; admission 10 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun). Thracian and Roman tombstones fill up much of the ground floor, along with weaponry and jewellery. Among the more eye-catching artefacts are a 3rd-century AD bronze head of the Emperor Gordianus; a stone plaque showing gladiatorial fights in the circus, now under the Arena di Serdica hotel (p100); and the original 4th-century AD mosaic floor from the apse of the Church of Sveta Sofia (right). On show upstairs are the remarkable finds unearthed near Shipka in 2004, including the 4th-century BC gold burial mask of a Thracian king, and a magnificent bronze head with coloured glass eyes and fine copper eyelashes, thought to be of King Sevtt. On the gallery level, the walls are lined with icons and frescoes removed from churches around Bulgaria. The wall facing the main entrance, meanwhile, is dominated by an early-20th-century reproduction of the Madara Horseman figure; the slightly more weathered original can be seen near Shumen (p169). Everything in the museum is labelled in English.

PRESIDENCY

The Bulgarian president's **office** (Map p88; pl Nezavisimost) occupies the eastern end of the grey, monolithic building that also houses the Sheraton Hotel. It's not open to the public, but the **changing of the guard** ceremony (on the hour) is a spectacle not to be missed, as soldiers in raffish Ruritanian uniforms stomp their way to their sentry boxes.

SVETI GEORGI ROTUNDA

Regarded as the oldest preserved building in Sofia, the **Sveti Georgi Rotunda** (Map p88), in the courtyard between the Sheraton Hotel and the Presidency, dates from the 4th century AD. This circular Roman structure, also known as the Church of St George, was largely rebuilt in the 6th century after being knocked about

TOP PICKS: FREE ATTRACTIONS

- Aleksander Nevski Memorial Church (below)
- Borisova Gradina (p92)
- Mondays at the National Gallery for Foreign Art (p92)
- Sofia Municipal Gallery of Art (opposite)

by invading Huns and in the 16th century was converted into a mosque. It was badly damaged by bombing during WWII and only fully opened to visitors again in 1998 after much restoration. The murals inside were painted on three layers between the 10th and 14th centuries.

Inside the entrance there's a small explanation in English about the church. You're also allowed to wander around the unlabelled Roman ruins behind the church.

Around Ploshad Aleksander Nevski ALEKSANDER NEVSKI MEMORIAL CHURCH

One of *the* symbols not just of Sofia but of Bulgaria itself, this massive, awe-inspiring **church** (Map p88; pl Aleksander Nevski) was built between 1882 and 1912 in memory of the 200,000 Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgaria's independence during the Russo-Turkish War (1877-78).

Designed by the esteemed Russian architect AN Pomerantsev, the church was built in the neo-Byzantine style favoured in Russia at the time and adorned with mosaics and gold-laden domes. The cavernous, incense-scented interior is decorated with naturalistic murals, pendulous chandeliers and elaborate onyx and alabaster thrones.

A door to the left of the main entrance leads to the **Aleksander Nevski Crypt** (Museum of Icons; ☎ 981 5775; admission 4 lv; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sat). It displays Bulgaria's biggest and best collection of religious icons from the last millennium, brought here from churches all over the country.

CHURCH OF SVETA SOFIA

There has been a church on this site since the mid-4th century, although the **Church of Sveta Sofia** (Map p88; ul Parizh) as it stands today is a much-restored 6th-century foundation, making it the oldest Orthodox church in the Bulgarian capital, to which it eventually gave

its name. The church fell victim to invading hordes, fires and earthquakes several times over the centuries, and after a devastating 1858 earthquake, the building, then used as a mosque, was abandoned. The present, rather sober, red-brick structure is mostly 19th century, and was restored as a church in the early 20th century. Outside stands the **Tomb of the Unknown Soldier**, with its eternal flame and stone lion, and on the northern side of the church is a simple monument commemorating Tsar Boris III's role in the rescue of Bulgaria's Jews.

SOFIA UNIVERSITY BOTANIC GARDEN

Easily overlooked near the Vasil Levski Memorial, the **Botanic Garden** (Map p88; ul Moskovska; admission 1 lv; ☎ 10am-6pm Tue-Sun) is a small, well-manicured plant collection, which includes a glasshouse filled with palms and cacti, a rose garden and various trees and flowers (labelled in Bulgarian and Latin).

NATIONAL GALLERY FOR FOREIGN ART

An eclectic assemblage of international artworks is on display in this huge **gallery** (Map p88; ☎ 988 4922; www.foreignartgallery.org; ul 19 Fevruari 1; admission 4 lv, Mon free, guided tours 15 lv; ☎ 11am-6pm Wed-Mon), and although you won't find any world-class treasures here, there are a few big names and plenty of little-known artists to discover. On the ground floor you can browse Indian woodcarvings, Burmese Buddhas, African tribal art and colourful Japanese prints. Upstairs are several galleries of European paintings, mostly by long-forgotten artists, while highpoints include a Van Dyck portrait, minor sketches by Renoir, Matisse and Degas, and a *Last Supper* attributed to Palma Vecchio. There are also some small bronzes by the 16th-century German Master Conrad Meit and bronze studies for *The Burgesses of Calais* by Rodin. Works of minor artists worth seeking out include Albert Andre's everyday scenes (such as *The Small Restaurant*) and Henry Moret's Impressionistic landscapes.

South of Ploshtad Aleksander Nevski MONUMENT TO THE SOVIET ARMY

Near the entrance to Borisova Gradina, this giant **monument** (Map p88) was built to commemorate the 10th anniversary of the Russian 'liberation' of Bulgaria in 1944 and is a prime example of the forceful socialist-

realism of the period. The place of honour goes to a Red Army soldier atop a column, surrounded by animated cast-iron sculptural groups depicting determined, gun-waving soldiers and grateful, child-caressing members of the proletariat.

BORISOVA GRADINA

Lying southeast of the city centre, Sofia's most attractive expanse of greenery is home to the **Vasil Levski Stadium** (Map p88), **CSKA Stadium** (Map p84) and **Maria Luisa Pool** (Map p84; ☎ 963 0054; ☎ 9am-8pm summer), as well as bike tracks and tennis courts. It's laid out with countless statues and flowerbeds, and is a relaxing place to take a leisurely stroll on a sunny Sunday afternoon. The eastern end of the park is dominated by a gigantic communist monument built in 1956 and known as the **Mound of Brotherhood** (Map p84), featuring a 42m-high obelisk and socialist-realist icons including a pair of partisan fighters, dramatically gesturing comrades clutching Kalashnikovs, and smiling, stoic workers. It has long been neglected by the authorities, and several of the socialist heroes are now missing limbs and gaining coats of graffiti, but small groups of pensioners come on occasion to lay flowers in remembrance of the red old days.

YUZHEN PARK

South of bul Bǎlgaria, behind the NDK, **Yuzhen Park** (Map p84) is a vast green sprawl, filled with trees and shady pathways, and is the closest you'll come to open countryside within the city. It's wilder, less managed, more peaceful and less populated than Borisova Gradina and has some superb, uninterrupted views towards Mt Vitoshka. A sparkling stream bubbles through it, and there is a handful of discreet bars and cafés that are not always easy to find, but it's a satisfying place to get lost in and explore for yourself.

NATIONAL PALACE OF CULTURE (NDK)

Bulevard Vitoshka leads down to the **National Palace of Culture** (NDK; Map p88), the city's vast concert hall (see p103), which watches over an elongated park known as pl Bulgaria. There are some kiosks and sociable bars here for those in search of a cheap alfresco beer, as well as carts selling popcorn and ice cream. It's also a favourite venue for Sofia's skateboarding teens. At the northern end of the park is the disintegrating **1300 Years Monument**, built in

1981 to celebrate the anniversary of the creation of the First Bulgarian Empire. It has been falling to pieces and fenced off for years, and nobody seems to want to take responsibility for the renovation – or more likely, the demolition – of this unloved monstrosity.

Nearby is the **memorial and chapel** dedicated to the victims of the communist regime, with a plaque bearing some 10,000 names. Behind it is a section of the Berlin Wall.

Steps just in front of the NDK building lead down into a gloomy **underpass** crammed with cheap clothes shops and cafés.

PEYO YAVOROV HOUSE-MUSEUM

The Romantic poet and revolutionary Peyo Yavorov (1878–1914; see the boxed text, below) briefly lived in the small apartment in this house, now a low-key **museum** (Map p88; ☎ 987 3414; 2nd fl, ul Rakovski 136; admission 1 lv; ☎ 10am-5pm Mon-Wed & Fri, 1-5pm Thu). The three rooms here have been restored to their original appearance, although there are worrying cracks everywhere. Ghoulish mementos include the dress Yavorov's wife, Lora, was wearing when she killed herself in the study, Yavorov's death-mask and several photographs of the unhappy couple. Ring the doorbell for admittance.

SVETI SEDMOCHISLENITSI CHURCH

Set in a leafy garden just off the main road, the **Church of the Seven Saints** (Map p88; ul Graf Ignatiev; ☎ 7am-7pm), as it's known in its more tongue-friendly translation, is dedicated to Sts Cyril and Methodius and their five disciples. Originally built as a mosque in 1528, it had already fallen into disuse by the time the Russians came along in 1878 and turned it into an arms depot. After a brief spell as a prison, the structure was restored and remod-

elled in a style termed Bulgarian National Romanticism, and consecrated as a church in 1903. Inside, the walls are covered in traditional murals of saints, while an image of the Trinity decorates the huge central dome. The gilded iconostasis includes icons painted by Anton Mitov and Stefan Ivanov.

The church is perhaps best known for its links with the choral group The Seven Saints Choir (see p51). CDs of its music are available at the little counter inside.

IVAN VAZOV HOUSE-MUSEUM

Bulgaria's best-loved author, Ivan Vazov (1850–1921), lived at this house, now a **museum** (Map p88; ☎ 988 1270; ul Ivan Vazov 10; admission 1 lv; ☎ 1-5pm Tue-Thu, 11am-5pm Fri & Sat), from 1895 until his death. Vazov wrote *Under the Yoke*, a classic of Bulgarian literature based around the 1876 April Uprising against the Turks. Several rooms have been restored to their early-20th-century appearance, and in the study, you can even meet Vazov's beloved pet dog, Bobby, whom Vazov had stuffed after he was run down by a tram. Downstairs, there's a small exhibition of photographs and documents, though labelling is only in Bulgarian. You'll need to ring the doorbell to gain admittance.

East of Ploshtad Aleksander Nevski DOCTORS' GARDEN

Just behind the National Library (Map p88), in one of the smartest residential areas in town, this neat, secluded and well-maintained park is a pleasant place to catch your breath. At the centre is a big, pyramidal monument dedicated to the medics who died in the Russo-Turkish War (1877–78). Also here is an outdoor lapidarium featuring lots of Roman architectural fragments dug up around Sofia.

PEYO YAVOROV

One of Bulgaria's most admired lyric poets, Peyo Yavorov's turbulent life story sounds like it could have come from the pages of a lost Puccini opera. He was born in Chirpan in 1878 and by his early 20s his moody writing style had won him acclaim in the highest literary circles. He was already a celebrated literary figure in Sofia when he joined the guerrillas fighting the Turks in Macedonia, later continuing the fight in the First Balkan War. His girlfriend Mina Todorova (whose parents had forbidden her relationship with the restless poet) died of consumption in Paris in 1910, and it was at her funeral that he met his next love, Lora Karavelova, who lived with him at the house on ul Rakovski that now holds a museum dedicated to his memory. However, theirs was a stormy marriage and Lora, jealous of her husband's supposed affairs with other women, shot herself in 1913. Yavorov, a now broken and penniless man, shot himself a year later.

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF MILITARY HISTORY

Don't be put off by the rusting army trucks in the overgrown front yard – this **museum** (Map p84; ☎ 946 1806; ul Cherkovna 92; admission 2 lv, guided tour 10 lv; 🕒 10am–6pm Wed–Sun) is among the most interesting and best presented in Sofia. Displays over three floors tell the story of warfare in Bulgaria from the time of the Thracians onwards, with extensive labelling and information boards in English. Most space goes to the period from the 1876 April Uprising through to WWI, with cases filled with weaponry, rebel flags and a seemingly endless parade of uniforms and personal belongings of soldiers. Among the more striking are the shaggy-fur flying costume, resembling a traditional Kuker outfit, worn by a Lt Simeon Petrov during the First Balkan War, and the pint-sized tunic of Nikola Kostov, a 10-year-old WWI 'volunteer'. Exhibits from WWII and the communist period follow, with the final gallery concentrating on the Bulgarian army's current peace-keeping role within NATO. An additional ticket (2 lv) is required for the 4th-floor galleries, which hold a collection of foreign decorations awarded to Bulgarian leaders and, if you haven't had your fill, yet more uniforms and guns.

The rear yard is home to an impressive assemblage of defunct, Soviet-made military hardware including Scud missile launchers, tanks and MiG fighters. Everything is labelled in English. The museum entrance is on ul Han Omurtag.

ACTIVITIES

There are a number of gyms, pools and sports centres around Sofia. For details about hiking, skiing and other popular activities, see Vitosha Nature Park (p109).

Bowling

The **Mega Xtreme Bowling Center** (off Map p84; ☎ 969 2600; ul Stefanov 12, Studentski Grad; per game 3–5 lv; 🕒 10am–4am) is a vast, state-of-the-art complex featuring an 18-lane bowling alley, pool tables and a disco with live music Friday and Saturday nights. To get there, catch minibus 7 from bul Maria Luisa.

Fitness

One of the most advanced gyms in town is **Sparta Fitness & Spinning** (Map p84; ☎ 963 1337; www.spartabg.com; bul Arsenalski 4; full-day pass 20 lv; 🕒 7am–

11pm Mon–Fri, 9am–9pm Sat & Sun). Besides the well-equipped gym, there's a sauna, pool and spa area. Yoga and Pilates classes, massages and more are available. A one-hour massage costs around 30 lv.

Paintballing

Paintballing has become a popular pastime around Sofia. **Paintball Bulgaria** (☎ 928 1125; www.paintballbulgaria.com; per game 15.99 lv; 🕒 10am–7pm) offers sessions around Mt Vitosha. The price includes equipment and 100 balls. Reservations are essential.

Swimming

If you need to cool off, go for a dip at **Spartak** (Map p84; ☎ 866 5973; bul Arsenalski 4; adult/child 4/3 lv; 🕒 7am–10pm Mon–Fri, 9am–8pm Sat & Sun) near the City Center Sofia mall. It's a big place with an Olympic-sized indoor pool and summer-only outdoor pool with a 'beach'. The Sparta Fitness & Spinning centre is on the same site.

Tennis

Run by the Maleeva sisters, a trio of ex-pro tennis players, the **Maleeva Tennis Club** (Map p84; ☎ 962 2288; www.maleevaclub.com; bul Nikola Vaptsarov) has both outdoor and indoor courts (per hour from 13/28 lv), as well as squash courts (45 minutes from 14 lv). Individual tennis coaching costs 26 lv per hour. Other facilities include a spa and sauna, and a 30-minute massage costs around 18 lv. See the website for a full price list.

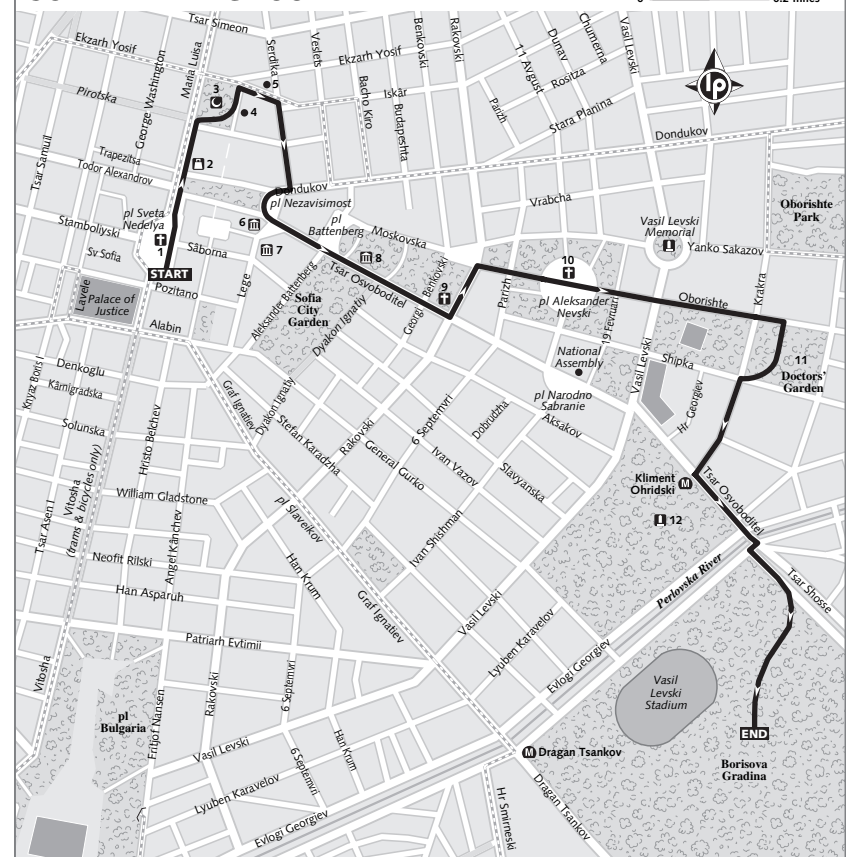
WALKING TOUR

Fortunately, most of Sofia's attractions are easily accessible on foot. Allow most of the day to fully appreciate the best of what the city has to offer.

Start from outside the magnificent **Sveta Nedelya Cathedral** (1; p87) and walk north up bul Maria Luisa, past the **Tsum Retail Centre** (2; p104) and its shops, to the **Banya Bashi Mosque** (3; p87). Walk through the square behind the mosque for a view of the **Mineral Baths** (4; p87). Cross the road and turn right on ul Ekzarh Yosif to get to the **drinking fountains** (5; p87), a good place to fill your water bottle with fresh mineral water.

Continue southeast on ul Serdika, emerging on the eastern end of pl Nezavisimost. Cross over to the **Presidency** (6; p91) where you can witness the Changing of the Guard

SOFIA WALKING TOUR



ceremony. Stop by the **Archaeological Museum** (7; p91) just opposite, which holds some of Bulgaria's greatest Thracian treasures. Follow the yellow brick road (bul Tsar Osvoboditel), and admire the grandeur of the former Royal Palace, which now hosts the **National Art Gallery** (8; p90). Carry on eastwards, past the glittery **Sveti Nikolai Russian Church** (9; p90). Cross ul Rakovski and you'll see pl Aleksander Nevski, dominated by the awesome **Aleksander Nevski Memorial Church** (10; p91).

Head east again, crossing bul Vasil Levski onto ul Oborishte, until you come to the secluded **Doctors' Garden** (11; p93). From here, walk down ul Krakra to bul Tsar Osvoboditel, stopping to take in the immense, socialist-

WALK FACTS

Start Sveta Nedelya Cathedral
Finish Borisova Gradina
Distance 2.5km
Duration 1½ hours

realist **Monument to the Soviet Army** (12; p92). Just beyond this, you'll cross the dinky Eagles Bridge, which spans the unassuming stream-like trickle known rather grandly as the Perlovka River. You'll then come upon the entrance to the vast Borisova Gradina, where you can relax under the horse-chestnut trees or refresh yourself with a beer at one of the outdoor cafés.

COURSES

Kibea Health Centre (Map p88; ☎ 988 0193; www.kibea.net; Kibea Health Food Restaurant, ul Valkovich 2a) Nutritional healing courses can be followed here. Three- to five-day courses, in English, start at €150, and cover various aspects of nutritional science.

Sofia University (Map p88; ☎ 971 7162; www.deo.uni-sofia.bg; bul Tsar Osvoboditel) Bulgarian language courses for foreigners are offered by the university. One-to-one courses cost 220 lv for 20 hours' tuition; group courses cost 200 lv per person for 20 hours. Summertime classes in Bulgarian language and folklore are also offered; the intensive two-week course costs 430 lv.

TanguerIN (Map p84; ☎ 0888373940; www.tanguer.in.com; ul Zlatovrah 51) Fancy learning the tango in Sofia?

This friendly studio in the Lozenets district runs private one-hour classes for 30 lv (more than one couple 20 lv) on weekday evenings. Longer courses are also available; see the website for details.

SOFIA FOR CHILDREN

Sofia has few obvious attractions for children, but you can try the following places.

Although looking a little sad and dated these days, with a collection of bedraggled animals, the **Sofia Zoo** (Map p84; ☎ 962 0449; bul Simeonovsko Shosse; admission 1 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm) does have a few play areas for children, and a couple of simple cafés. It's free for children under seven years old.

Young speed fans (over eight years old) can take the wheel of a motorised go-kart and

zoom around the twisting, 1km-long track at **Karting Sport** (Map p84; ☎ 920 1447; www.karting-bg.com; bul Vardar 3a; per lap 2 lv; ☎ 9am-9pm May-Sep, 10am-6pm Oct-Apr), a modern speedway circuit in the Krasna Polyana district. Take bus 11 or tram 11 or 22 to get here.

Kids and adults can enjoy active, out-doors fun at **Kokolandia** (Map p84; ☎ 831 3095; www.kokolandia.com; ul Nezabravka; admission from around 3 lv; ☎ 9am-9pm May-Oct), an adventure park inside Borisova Gradina. Divided into three increasingly challenging areas, it offers rope-climbing, tree-top obstacle courses (harnesses provided), rock-climbing walls and a minigolf course. The first zone is suitable for children aged five to 10, while the third is for over-18s only.

Play areas can also be found in Borisova Gradina, which has wide open green spaces that young children might enjoy. Older siblings might prefer a game of bowls at Mega Xtreme Bowling Center (p94) or a spot of tennis at the Maleeva Tennis Club (p94). There are no reliable baby-sitting agencies working with foreign tourists, although some top-end hotels may be able to provide such services.

TOURS

Almost everything worth seeing in Sofia is accessible on foot, so unless you're seriously pressed for time there's little point taking an organised tour around the city.

Rila Monastery (p117) is awkward to visit in one day by public transport from Sofia, so an organised tour may be more convenient. However, renting a car or even chartering a taxi for the day may be cheaper for a group of two to four people, and will certainly be more flexible. For details about renting cars and hiring taxis, see p301.

The following companies offer tours in and around Sofia:

Eurotours (Map p84; ☎ 931 1500; basement, central train station; ☎ 6am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) Offers various day trips by car, including tours to Rila Monastery for around €70. The cost is per car, seating up to four people.

Tourist Service (TUI; Map p84; ☎ 832 4032; www.tourist-service.com; ul Klokochnitsa 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Opposite the Princess Hotel, the TUI runs three-hour tours by car around Sofia (from €35 per person for a party of two) and 'folkloric evenings' of music, food and dance (from €70). Other day trips, which include lunch, go to Rila Monastery (€90) and Koprivishtitsa (€90). Prices for

larger groups (in a minivan) work out slightly cheaper per person.

Zig Zag Holidays (Map p88; ☎ 980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Offers all sorts of tailor-made outdoor activities, including hiking, climbing, caving and biking trips. It offers day trips to Rila Monastery (€67) and walking tours of Sofia (€25). Prices are per person, for groups of up to three. Entrance is on ul Lavele.

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Sofia International Film Festival (www.cinema.bg/sff) Movie buffs descend on the capital each March.

Sofia International Folklore Festival Takes place in and around the city for five days in late August.

Sofia Fest Includes cultural events, concerts and exhibits held at various galleries and museums, as well as the Church of Sveta Sofia, around 14 to 18 September.

St Sofia's Day The city's patron saint is honoured with services at churches across the capital on 17 September.

Cinemanía An international, month-long celebration of independent filmmaking held in the NDK in November.

SLEEPING

Unsurprisingly, accommodation in Sofia tends to be more expensive than anywhere else in Bulgaria, with prices at most establishments now comparable to those in Western European cities. Over recent years there has been a surge in the number of top-end hotels, but fortunately for budget travellers, Sofia also has a growing number of modern, good-quality hostels. Note that the majority of places quote prices in euros, though of course you can also pay in leva.

Budget HOSTELS

Hostel Turisticheska Spalnya (Map p88; ☎ 983 6181; www.ts-hostel.com; ul Tsar Simeon 63; dm/d from €9/14) This bright, clean hostel is in a great central location and offers pleasant, high-ceilinged dorms of between three and five beds, as well as a double room and modern bathrooms.

Sofia Backpackers' Inn (Map p88; ☎ 983 1672; www.sofiabackpackersinn.dir.bg; ul Struma 6; dm/d incl breakfast from €9/25; ☎ ☎) Small, friendly hostel, with English-speaking staff, on a quiet side street off bul Maria Luisa. There are a couple of slightly cramped four- and six-bed dorms, one double and a comfy TV lounge with a balcony, and the price includes unlimited tea and coffee. Parking is available for bikes and motorcycles (2 lv per day).

A SOFIAN SPEAKS

We asked Georgi Dimitrov, a 28-year-old project manager at the sustainable travel agency Odyssea-In, for his thoughts on his home city and how he sees Bulgarian tourism developing in the future.

What is Sofia like as a place to live?

I think Sofia is becoming a harder place to live; due to the increasing traffic and the ever-greater concentration of business and industry in the city, it gets very crowded during the week. There's more space to breathe in summer, though, when most people head to the Black Sea for their holidays. I still live [in Sofia] because I have a big family here, and I have a great job. There's also a big advantage living next door to Vitosha Nature Park, and Rila National Park is just 80km away, so Sofia is a handy gateway for keen mountaineers like myself. Sofia also has [a] good social life, which you can hardly find anywhere else in Bulgaria, and a big variety of bars and restaurants.

What do you get up to in your spare time?

I like going to bars and cinemas on the weekends, or cycling round the city's quieter streets. I often spend time in the parks...my favourite is Yuzhen Park, but Borisova Gradina has some wild areas for cycling too, and a very refreshing swimming pool, the Maria Luisa pool – a cool escape from the burning heat of August in Sofia! I like hiking in Vitosha Nature Park with my family, too. There are many pathways, fascinating nature and interesting churches like Boyana Church and Dragalevtsi Monastery. Vitosha is also great in winter for skiing and snowshoeing, which is real fun!

Why should travellers spend time in Sofia, and what are its best attractions?

Sofia alone is an interesting destination. Nearly all the highlights are concentrated in the centre, so you can explore on foot, and there are a number of attractive little parks where you can get away from the noise of the city. I'd recommend visiting the thermal springs opposite the Hali [shopping centre], where you can experience the 'real Sofia' and meet some of the locals, and a visit to one of the city's churches on a Sunday for the Orthodox liturgy.

How do you see tourism developing in Bulgaria, and what would you say are the country's unique selling points?

Unfortunately, at present tourism development in Bulgaria is far from sustainable. There is recognition in the tourism sector of the need for sustainable development, but it's held back by a lack of motivation and knowledge, and there is still much to be done when it comes to tourism infrastructure. However, Bulgaria is a land with great historical heritage, fascinating nature and friendly people, and it's a country where you can still get a sense of the traditional, sustainable lifestyle that has been largely forgotten elsewhere on the Continent. Bulgaria offers great hiking, biking and skiing, authentic folklore festivals, good beer and very good wine!

Art Hostel (Map p88; ☎ 987 0545; www.art-hostel.com; ul Angel Kanchev 21a; dm incl breakfast €10; 🏠) This bohemian hostel stands out from the crowd with its summertime art exhibitions, live music and more. Accommodation consists of a couple of small dorms (one with bathroom) plus summer-only 'basic accommodation' (ie space for your sleeping bag on the floor) for €5. A communal kitchen and peaceful little garden are available to guests, too.

Internet Hostel Sofia (Map p88; ☎ 0888384828; 2nd fl, ul Alabin 50a; dm/s/d/apt incl breakfast from €10/18/26/40; 🏠) A great deal in a very central location just off bul Vitosha. Rooms are large and clean, with five- and six-bed dorms (no bunks) and an apartment, sleeping up to four, with private kitchen. There's also a communal kitchen, laundry service and bicycle hire. Not immediately obvious from street level, the entrance is inside an arcade a couple of doors down from a McDonald's.

Hostel Mostel (Map p88; ☎ 0889223296; www.hostelmotel.com; ul Denkoglu 2; dm/s/d incl breakfast from €10/25/30; 🏠) Popular Mostel has six- and eight-bed dorms, either with shared or private bathrooms, as well as a single and a couple of doubles; guests have use of a kitchen and cosy lounge. If you're just looking for a bare bed to lay down your sleeping bag, it's yours for €7. Free pick-ups from the bus and train stations are available.

MAKING A DIFFERENCE

Like any other big European city, Sofia has its social problems, and beggars are a common feature on the streets. Many are elderly, struggling to exist on very low pensions and have resorted to selling flowers, singing, playing an instrument or simply sitting beside a battered old pair of bathroom scales where passers-by can weigh themselves for a few stotinki. Anything you can spare will be greatly appreciated. Beware, though, the professional beggars who pretend to be mentally or physically disabled, and gangs of children. Another way to help out is to book into private rooms, usually rented out by pensioners with little other means of support. The much-needed cash will go straight into their pockets, and be spent locally.

Sofia Guesthouse (Map p88; ☎ 981 3656; www.sofia.guest.com; bul Patriarh Evtimii 27; dm/d/q €10/30/36; 🏠) Newish, central hostel with clean dorms and a couple of private rooms sleeping between two and four people. It offers free pick-ups from the bus and train stations (€5 from the airport) and various day trips.

PRIVATE ROOMS

Sofia has plenty of private rooms available to foreign tourists, usually offering a much better deal than the city's few budget hotels.

Eurotours (Map p88; ☎ 931 1500; www.eurotours.bg; basement, central train station; 🕒 6am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat & Sun) This agency in the basement of the central train station offers rooms from as little as €12 per person, although these are likely to be some way from the centre.

Zig Zag Holidays (Map p88; ☎ 980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20-V; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Sat) Arranges rooms with a shared bathroom in private homes. Singles cost €15 to €18 and doubles €24 to €30, including breakfast.

Alma Tours (Map p88; ☎ 986 5691; www.almatour.net; bul Stamboliyski 27; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) Arranges single/double rooms in private homes around the city centre for €16/20.

Wasteels (Map p84; ☎ 931 1117; www.wasteels.bg; central train station; 🕒 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) Friendly and professional outfit that can book private rooms for €20, and hotel rooms starting at around €50.

HOTELS

Good-quality budget hotels are a bit of a rarity in Sofia, and the cheaper places that do exist are often either squalid dives best avoided or in awkward-to-reach locations – private rooms or hostels are a much better deal. These listed here are among the more reliable.

Hotel Maya (Map p88; ☎ 980 2796; 2nd fl, ul Trapezitsa 4; r 30-40 lv) Remarkably good value for such a central location, the Maya feels more like a set of old-fashioned rooms in a private home (which is what it is, basically), presided over by a chatty but non-English-speaking landlady. All rooms have TV and fridges, though individual bathrooms are detached, and there is one double with private bathroom (40 lv). The entrance is inside the courtyard that's just past the small art supplies shop.

Hotel Edona (Map p88; ☎ 983 2036; bul Slivnitsa 172; s/d 30/40 lv, with bathroom 40/60 lv) Basic-but-clean

hotel overlooking the Lions Bridge just off bul Maria Luisa. Rooms are plain, with tiled floors and minimal furnishing, though all come with TVs, and it's handy for the central bus and train stations.

Hotel Enny (Map p88; ☎ 983 4395; ul Pop Bogomil 64; s/d/tr with shared bathroom 30/40/60 lv, s/d with bath 40/50 lv, d with bath & toilet 60 lv) The Enny is a neat, quiet place that offers reasonable value for budget-conscious travellers, although some rooms, especially the singles, are small and you don't even get a fan for this price. It's well signposted from bul Maria Luisa.

Midrange

Hotel Ametist (Map p88; ☎ 983 5475; ul Tsar Simeon 67; s/d/tr 48/60/72 lv) The location, just round the corner from the Central Hali Shopping Centre, is convenient and rooms are clean and comfortable and come with TVs and fridges, although bathrooms are tiny. Rooms 102 and 202, on the corner, are slightly bigger and have balconies.

Red Bed & Breakfast (Map p88; ☎ 988 8188; www.redbandb.com; ul Lyuben Karavelov 15; s/d from €25/40) Attached to the Red House cultural centre (p103), in an unusual Italianate building designed for the sculptor Andrei Nikolov, this six-room hotel is a unique place to stay. All rooms are decorated in different styles and colours, though none have private bathrooms.

Hotel Pop Bogomil (Map p88; ☎ 983 1165; www.bulgariabedandbreakfast.com; ul Pop Bogomil 5; r €32-40; 🏠) This small hotel has 10 clean and comfy rooms, all individually decorated. It's handy enough for the central train and bus stations, though a little out of the way for anything else.

Hotel Niky (Map p88; ☎ 953 0110; www.hotel-niky.com; ul Neofit Rilski 16; s/d/ste from €35/40/55; 🏠) Offering excellent value and a good city-centre location, the Niky has comfortable rooms and gleaming bathrooms, as well as a communal garden and restaurant. Suites all come with kitchenettes with microwave ovens, fridges and tea- and coffee-making facilities. It's a very popular place and frequently full. Advance reservations are recommended.

Hotel Aris (Map p84; ☎ 931 3177; www.hotel-aris.com; ul Knyaz Boris I 203; s/d/tr from €40/50/60; 🏠) Hidden away on a cobbled street in the shadow of the Princess Hotel, the Aris is a neat, modern hotel with smallish but comfortable rooms featuring the standard three-star amenities,

including TVs and fridges. It's a quiet spot, not far from the bus and train stations.

Sun Hotel (Map p88; ☎ 983 3670; www.sun.hotel-bg.com; bul Maria Luisa 89; s/d/ste €49/59/90; 🏠) Opposite the Hotel Lion, this well-kept hotel in a renovated 19th-century building is one of the smarter establishments in this area. It's handy for the central train and bus stations, but not so convenient for the sights. Rooms are small but clean and functional.

Scotty's Boutique Hotel (Map p88; ☎ 983 6777; scottysotel@yahoo.com; ul Ekzarh Yosif 11; s/d from €50/60; 🏠) Opposite the synagogue, Scotty's is a small, stylish, gay-friendly hotel with just nine rooms, all individually designed and named after international cities – such as the Cape Town Room, kitted out with zebra-print details. Breakfast, delivered to your room, is €5 extra.

Hotel Lion (Map p88; ☎ 917 8400; www.hotel-lion.net; bul Maria Luisa 60; s/d/ste €58/70/96; 🏠) Facing the Lions Bridge, this is a grand old building in a lively location. Rooms are large, modern and come in a variety of shapes and styles, some with striking arched windows.

Hotel Central (Map p84; ☎ 981 2364; www.central-hotel.com; bul Hristo Botev 52; s/d/ste from €65/80/120; 🏠) The Central is a clean-cut business hotel sitting on a busy main road just west of the city centre. Rooms are neat, if a bit small, but it has a restful atmosphere, and weekend discounts of between 10% and 20% make it good value.

Hotel Diter (Map p88; ☎ 989 8998; www.diterhotel.com; ul Han Asparuh 65; s/d Sun-Thu €65/85, Fri & Sat €55/75; 🏠) The Diter is a small, homely hotel set in a restored 19th-century building on a quiet backstreet, though still within easy walking distance of the centre. The bright, orange rooms are comfortable and bathrooms are large and shiny.

Hotel Sveta Sofia (Map p88; ☎ 981 2634; www.sveta.sofia-alexanders.com; ul Pirotska 18; s/d €75/85; 🏠) Enjoying a superb location on the busy, pedestrianised ul Pirotska, Sveta Sofia has a slightly snooty atmosphere, but rooms are attractively furnished and there's a good restaurant on site. Weekend and long-stay discounts are on offer.

Kolikovski Hotel (Map p88; ☎ 933 3000; www.kolikovski.com; ul Hristo Belchev 42; s/d/ste incl breakfast from €80/90/120; 🏠) Occupying a bright, attractively renovated building on a side street near the NDK, the Kolikovski offers a range of

rooms, including 'business class' (with a free bottle of wine thrown in) and some spacious suites – the one on the 5th floor comes with kitchenette and terrace.

Hotel Arte (Map p88; ☎ 402 7100; www.artehotelbg.com; bul Dondukov 5; s/d/ste from €85/110; (P) (X) (Z)) One of the newer city-centre hotels, Arte is a friendly place with stylish rooms, all with flat-screen TVs, fridges and wi-fi connections. Suites have a sofa bed that can be pulled out to accommodate an extra two people. Breakfast is an additional €10.

Art'Otel (Map p88; ☎ 980 6000; www.artotel.biz; ul William Gladstone 44; s/d from €95/100; (P) (Z)) Tucked down a narrow side street off bul Vitoshka and housed in a tastefully renovated 1930s building, Art'Otel has 22 spacious rooms with bright bathrooms. In keeping with its name, there are contemporary artworks dotted throughout the building.

Top End

Princess Hotel (Map p84; ☎ 933 8888; bul Maria Luisa 131; s/d/ste from €97/117/155; (P) (X) (Z) (Z)) With over 600 rooms, this gigantic place has a justifiable claim to be the biggest hotel in the Balkans. Rooms are comfy and spacious and top-notch facilities include a gym, sauna, pool and shops. Size really does matter here, and the hotel also encompasses Bulgaria's biggest casino. It's convenient for the train and bus stations, though not for anything else.

Hotel Les Fleurs (Map p88; ☎ 810 0800; www.lesfleurshotel.com; bul Vitoshka 21; s/d/ste from €140/180/230; (P) (X) (Z)) Slap bang in the middle of Sofia's main shopping street, this *très chic* boutique hotel opened in 2007. The unmissable façade is decorated with outsize blooms, and the flowery motif is continued in the large, carefully styled, nonsmoking rooms.

Central Park Hotel (Map p88; ☎ 805 8888; www.centralparkhotel.bg; bul Vitoshka 106; s/d/ste from €150/170/220; (P) (X) (Z)) Overlooking the NDK, this towering four-star hotel is a classy, newish option offering large, airy rooms with some great views. There's a very good restaurant and the hotel offers a baby-sitting service.

our pick **Arena di Serdica** (Map p88; ☎ 819 9191; www.arenadiserdica.com; ul Budapeshta 2-4; s/d/ste from €190/210/240; (P) (Z)) What might have been just another glassy, upscale hotel received a public-relations boost when the remains of Sofia's long-sought-after Roman amphitheatre were uncovered during construction in 2004; the curving walls have been preserved

below the foyer, and visitors are welcome. The rooms themselves are contemporary and stylish, with king-size beds, minibars and rather smart bathrooms. There's also a Roman-style steam bath and gym. Summer rates (July and August) are marginally cheaper.

Grand Hotel Sofia (Map p88; ☎ 811 0800; www.grandhotelfofia.bg; ul General Gurko 1; s/d/ste Mon-Thu from €290/310/490, s/d Fri-Sun from €155/170; (P) (X) (Z)) Right in the heart of the city, the Grand is a swanky, 109-room, glass-and-granite affair looming over the southern edge of the City Garden. It's an upscale place, with uniformed doormen and lots of marble, and the spacious rooms are fitted with the latest mod cons. Facilities include a fitness centre, a couple of restaurants, some boutiques and a café.

Sheraton Sofia Hotel Balkan (Map p88; ☎ 981 6541; www.luxurycollection.com/sofia; pl Sveta Nedelya 5; s/d/ste from €310/320/420; (P) (X) (Z)) This grand old Sofian landmark represents the epitome of luxury. Marble floors, glittering chandeliers and large, elegantly furnished rooms provide a level of opulence that would please the most demanding guests. The official rates are startlingly high, but discounts are frequently available.

EATING

Compared with the rest of Bulgaria, Sofia is gourmet heaven, with an unrivalled range of international cuisines represented and new, quality restaurants springing up all the time. It also has countless snack bars, fast-food outlets and cafés dotted across town.

Bulgarian Restaurants

Trops Káshta (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa 26; mains 2-4 lv; ☎ 8am-9pm) There are several branches of this budget cafeteria around town, offering Bulgarian favourites such as *kebabche* (grilled spicy meat sausages) and *moussaka*. The menu is in Bulgarian only, but you can point at whatever takes your fancy and trust to luck. Best to get here early as popular items get snapped up and the remainder get cold.

Pri Yafata (Map p88; ☎ 980 1727; ul Solunska 28; mains 6-15 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) Another traditional-style place with agricultural tools, rifles, *chergas* (patterned rugs) and other rustic reminders adorning the walls. Hearty dishes of duck, rabbit, pork and chicken are on the lengthy menu, which also includes plenty of vegetarian options. It's a very popular place,

and reservations are advisable for the evenings, which regularly feature live music.

our pick **Manastirska Magernitsa** (Map p88; ☎ 980 3883; ul Han Asparuh 67; mains 7-10 lv; ☎ 11am-2am) Set in the courtyard of a 19th-century townhouse and decked out like an old-fashioned *mehana* (tavern), this is among the best places in the city to sample some first-class, traditional Bulgarian cuisine. The menu is enormous and encompasses recipes collected from monasteries and villages all over the country, with dishes such as 'drunken rabbit' stewed in wine and 'quails in a nest', as well as salads, grills, fish, chicken, pork and game options. There's also an extensive wine list, which includes some pricey vintage bottles.

International Restaurants

Dream House (Map p88; ☎ 980 8163; 1st fl, ul Alabin 50a; mains 3-4 lv; ☎ 11am-10pm) Although not the easiest place to find – look for the door on the left inside the small shopping arcade and climb the stairs – this vegetarian restaurant is well worth seeking out. The menu includes dishes such as grilled tofu, algae soup and various stir-fries. There's an all-you-can-eat buffet on Sundays (5 lv) and beer and wine are available.

Pizza Troll (pizzas 3-10 lv, mains 6-18 lv) bul Vitoshka 27 (Map p88; ☎ 981 5833; ☎ 24hr; pl Slaveikov 6a (Map p88; ☎ 980 4553; ☎ 8am-midnight) Dozens of pizzas fill the menu pages at these bright and cheery outlets. Those who've tired of cheese can choose from plenty of pasta, chicken and fish dishes, too.

Happy Bar & Grill (Map p88; ☎ 980 7353; pl Sveta Nedelya 4; mains 5-10 lv; ☎ 24hr) Big branch of the dependable nationwide chain offering a menu of fairly standard but tasty salads and grills. You can sit outside and watch the sports channels on the numerous silent TVs, or inside among the Planet Hollywood-style mess of movie posters, guitars and saxophones, while friendly, microskirted waitstaff flit between the tables. It's packed out in the evenings.

Victoria (Map p88; ☎ 986 3200; bul Tsar Osvoboditel 7; mains 5-12 lv; ☎ 24hr) In the shady courtyard of a grand neoclassical building next to the Officers' Club, Victoria is a big hit with locals who drop by throughout the day for the excellent pizzas. Pasta and chicken dishes also feature.

Kibea Health Food Restaurant (Map p88; ☎ 980 3067; ul Valkovich 2a; mains 6-10 lv; ☎ noon-11pm Mon-Sat)

Kibea offers a refreshingly different menu of mostly vegetarian and vegan dishes such as barley risotto with squash, although a limited choice of chicken and fish dishes are sometimes available, too. It's probably the only restaurant in Bulgaria to completely ban smoking, and there's a bookshop downstairs.

Spagheti Company (Map p88; ☎ 926 0427; bul Dondukov 1; mains 6-15 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) Discreetly located in the courtyard at the back of the Tsum Retail Centre, this Italian restaurant has become a popular spot for lunchtime business meetings. It serves up some good, if relatively expensive, pasta dishes, and offers a short wine list.

Olive's (Map p88; ☎ 986 0902; ul Graf Ignatiev 12; mains 8-15 lv; ☎ 10am-3am) Walls splashed with vintage advertising posters and mock newspapers for menus give Olive's a quirky twist, and the international cuisine on offer is excellent, featuring dishes such as chorizo sausages, chicken skewers, pasta, steaks and burgers. It gets very crowded at night.

Egur-Egur (Map p88; ☎ 989 3383; ul Dobrudzha 10; mains 8-20 lv; ☎ noon-midnight) Hearty Armenian cuisine is served up at this convivial restaurant, with plenty of kebabs, steaks, stews and other meaty offerings available (though there's also a decent range of vegetarian dishes).

Tambuktu (Map p88; ☎ 988 1234; ul Aksakov 10; mains 8-30 lv; ☎ noon-midnight) One of the very few restaurants in Sofia specialising in seafood, this is a big, bright and slightly tacky-looking place, dressed up with lurid maritime knick-knacks. However, the fish and crustaceans on the large menu are expertly cooked.

Background (Map p88; ☎ 986 3529; bul Vitoshka 14; mains 9-20 lv; ☎ 10am-midnight) Attractive courtyard restaurant offering an upmarket menu (in English) featuring things such as duck in port sauce, tagliatelle with truffles and chicken breasts with roasted brie. The food is good, but it's a little let down by slow service.

Cafés

In summer, cafés seem to occupy every piece of garden and footpath in Sofia. Some are just basic spots for a coffee and a sandwich, while others offer a more refined setting for cocktails and cakes. Most cafés are open from about 8am to midnight.

Café de Sofi (Map p88; ul Pirotska; cakes from 2.50 lv) This sociable summer outdoor café beside

the Central Hali Shopping Center makes a handy pit stop for drinks and snacks.

Cafe Theatre (Map p88; ul Vasil Levski; cakes from 3 lv) Beside the imposing Ivan Vazov National Theatre, this summer-only pavement café is a pleasant spot for drinks and cakes.

Toba & Co (Map p88; ☎ 989 4696; ul Moskovska 6; snacks from 3 lv; ☎ 8.30am-6am) Hidden away in what was once Tsar Ferdinand's butterfly house, in the gardens at the rear of the Royal Palace, this discreet café is a charming spot to indulge in an alfresco cocktail, as well as ice cream and cakes.

Club Lavazza (Map p88; ☎ 987 3433; bul Vitoshka 13; mains 6-8 lv) A chic, continental-style spot for coffee and cocktails, Lavazza also offers a brief food menu. It gets very smoky indoors, but in summer there's outdoor seating.

Quick Eats

There are plenty of kiosks around town where you can buy tasty local fast food such as *banitsa* (cheese pasties) and *palachinki* (pancakes), as well as the inevitable hot dogs and burgers.

Sladak Svyat (Map p88; ul Alabin; banitsa from 0.60 lv; ☎ 6.30am-9pm) Typical simple bakery serving up a tasty selection of *banitsa*, bread rolls, cakes and other street-snack fare.

Bakehouse (Map p88; ul Ivan Vazov 12; snacks from 1 lv; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 9am-6pm Sat) Another good place to pick up a variety of *banitsa* and other cheap street eats.

Central Hali Shopping Centre (Map p88; bul Maria Luisa 25; ☎ 7am-midnight) There are several outlets in the upstairs food court in this market complex (see p104) that sell cheap fast food such as kebabs, pizzas and ice cream, as well as beer at half the price of the snazzier bar downstairs. Despite the official opening hours, the food court closes down by about 9pm.

Self-Catering

An abundance of fresh fruit and veg can be yours at the Central Hali (Map p88), the Ladies' Market (Map p88) and the stalls (Map p88) along ul Graf Ignatiev (outside the Sveti Sedmochislenitsi Church). For everything else, try Bonjour Supermarket (Map p88) or the branches of Piccadilly Supermarket (off Map p88), which can be found in the basements of the Mall of Sofia and the City Center Sofia shopping malls.

DRINKING

There's a seemingly inexhaustible supply of watering holes all over Sofia. The cheapest places to grab a beer are the kiosks in the city's parks; if you're looking for a more sophisticated ambience, the city centre has plenty of swish new bars.

Pri Kmeta (Map p88; ☎ 981 3399; ul Parizh 2; ☎ noon-4am) 'At the Mayor's' is a convivial microbrewery serving its own 'Kmetsko' beer, which is available in litre and, for the very thirsty, metre-length measures. There are seats at ground level, but the cellar beer hall, with its gleaming copper vats, is more atmospheric, and hosts regular live music events.

Upstairs (Map p88; ☎ 989 9896; bul Vitoshka 18; ☎ 10am-2am) Join the 'in-crowd' on the 1st-floor terrace stools of Upstairs and look down on the shoppers and trams of bul Vitoshka over a cocktail or two, or lounge on the sofas inside. It's all good.

Buddha Bar (Map p88; ☎ 989 5006; ul Lege 15a; ☎ 24hr) Very hip, very trendy and very crowded, this Buddha-bedecked drinking spot also serves food, and has a nightly disco from around 9pm.

Exit (Map p88; ☎ 0888140133; ul Lavele 16; ☎ 8am-2am) This modern and fashionable bar/diner is a popular gay venue, with a DJ party every evening.

Sofia also has its share of Irish pubs, frequented by expats knocking back overpriced imported beers and stouts. These include **JJ Murphy's** (Map p88; ☎ 980 2870; ul Kárnigradska 6; ☎ noon-12.30am), **Dublin** (Map p88; ☎ 943 4004; ul Alabin 54; ☎ 24hr) and **Irish Harp** (Map p88; ☎ 989 9276; ul Sveta Sofia 7; ☎ 10am-midnight), which offers live music and satellite TV showing international football matches.

ENTERTAINMENT

If you read Bulgarian, or at least can decipher some of the Cyrillic, *Programata* is the most comprehensive source of entertainment listings; otherwise check out its excellent English-language website, www.programata.bg. You can book tickets online at www.ticketpro.bg.

Nightclubs

Some clubs charge admission fees of anywhere between 2 lv and 15 lv, mostly late at night and on weekends when live bands are playing. Studentski Grad is home to several

of Sofia's trendier clubs; ask around for the latest venues.

Social Jazz Club (Map p88; ☎ 0884622220; www.socialjazzclub.com; pl Slaveikov 4; ☎ 10pm-4am Mon-Sat) The place to go to catch some quality live jazz, with a programme of leading international acts.

Swingin' Hall (Map p84; ☎ 963 0696; bul Dragan Tsankov 8; ☎ 9pm-4am Tue-Sun) Huge club offering an eclectic programme of live music each night, ranging from jazz and blues to rock and folk pop.

Avenue (off Map p84; ☎ 0888400435; ul Atanas Manchev 1a, Studentski Grad; ☎ 24hr) One of the more popular student joints, Avenue plays both Western songs and Bulgarian *chalga* (folk pop) music.

Chervilo (Map p88; ☎ 981 6633; bul Tsar Osvoboditel 9; ☎ 10.30pm-6am Tue-Sat) The live music, guest DJs and themed party nights at 'Lipstick' draw in Sofia's young and fashionable set at night, and it also has a pleasant terrace for sitting out with a drink or two.

Cinemas

As well as a couple of modern multiplexes, Sofia has several smaller cinemas dotted around town. Most screen recent English-language films with Bulgarian subtitles, although cartoons and children's films are normally dubbed into Bulgarian. Tickets cost anything from 4 lv to 12 lv, depending on the comfort of the theatres and the times of the sessions.

Cinema City (Map p84; ☎ 929 2929; www.cinema-city.bg; Mall of Sofia, bul Stamboliyski 101; tickets 4-7 lv) Modern, multiscreen cinema on the top floor of the Mall of Sofia, showing the latest Hollywood releases.

Cineplex (Map p84; ☎ 964 3007; www.cineplex.bg; City Center Sofia, bul Arsenalski 2; tickets 4-10 lv) Another state-of-the-art multiscreen cinema inside the City Center Sofia mall, offering the same fare as Cinema City.

Odeon (Map p88; ☎ 989 2469; bul Patriarh Evtimii 1; tickets 4-6 lv) Snubs modernity by showing only classic old films, which run for months at a time.

Dom Na Kinoto (Map p88; ☎ 980 3911; ul Ekzarh Yosif 37; tickets 4-5 lv) Mainly shows Bulgarian-language and art-house films.

Theatre & Music

Ticket prices at these venues vary enormously. For the Opera House or the National Theatre,

they might cost anything from 10 lv to 30 lv; shows at the NDK vary much more, with tickets costing from 30 lv to 70 lv for international acts and around 10 lv to 30 lv for local ones.

National Opera House (Map p88; ☎ 987 1366; www.operasofia.com; ul Vrabcha 1; ☎ ticket office 9.30am-6.30pm) Bulgaria's best divas strut the boards here and artists from around the world often perform in the well-staged productions.

National Palace of Culture (NDK; Map p88; ☎ 916 6369; www.ndk.bg; pl Bulgaria; ☎ ticket office 9am-7pm) The NDK (as it's usually called) has 15 halls and is easily the country's largest cultural complex. It maintains a regular programme of events in summer (when most other theatres in Sofia are closed) and offers an eclectic range of shows throughout the year (recently featured artists have included George Michael and Chuck Berry).

Bulgaria Hall (Map p88; ☎ 987 7656; ul Aksakov 1; ☎ ticket office 9.30am-6pm) The home of the excellent Sofia Philharmonic Orchestra, this is the place to come for classical music concerts.

Ivan Vazov National Theatre (Map p88; ☎ 811 9219; www.nationaltheatre.bg; ul Dyakon Ignatij 5; ☎ Sep-Jun) The National Theatre Company stages dramatic performances in this grand old building.

Red House (Map p88; ☎ 988 8188; www.redhouse-sofia.org; ul Lyuben Karavelov 15) Occupying a unique, early-20th-century mansion, this avant-garde institution hosts everything from political and cultural debates (in various languages) to poetry readings and dance performances. Many events are free; check the website for the current programme. There's also a hotel here (p99).

Sport

Football (soccer) is Bulgaria's main sporting passion, and Sofia alone has four teams. The main clubs are **CSKA** (☎ 963 3477), which plays at the CSKA Stadium (Map p84) in Borisova Gradina and **Levski** (☎ 989 2156), based at the Georgi Asparoukhov Stadium (off Map p84; bul Vladimir Vazov, Poduyane). Lokomotiv and Slavia are Sofia's two smaller teams.

No other spectator sport comes anywhere near to the popularity enjoyed by football, although basketball has a keen, if relatively small, following. The main teams are, again, named **CSKA** (☎ 898 593; www.cskabasket.net) and **Levski** (☎ 983 7893; www.levskibasket.com).

The **Vasil Levski Stadium** (Map p88; ☎ 988 5030; Borisova Gradina) is the main venue for international football matches, athletics and other big sporting events.

SHOPPING

Bulevard Vitosha is Sofia's main shopping street, mostly featuring international brand-name boutiques interspersed with restaurants. More shops cluster along ul Graf Ignatiev, while ul Pirotska is a central pedestrian mall lined with cheaper shops selling clothes, shoes and household goods. Sofia now also has a couple of sleek, ultramodern shopping malls, housing international fashion chains, cinemas and coffee bars. Street stalls and markets are the best places to seek souvenirs.

Camping & Skiing Equipment

Stenata (Map p88; ☎ 980 5491; www.stenata.com; ul Bratia Miladinovi 5; ☎ 10am-8pm) The best place in town to buy hiking, climbing and camping equipment, including backpacks, tents and sleeping bags, but it doesn't hire gear.

Alpin Sport (off Map p84; ☎ 0886456600; www.alpinsport-bg.com; off ul Geo Milev, Slatina; ☎ 10am-7pm) Slightly out of the way, near the Akademik Stadium in the eastern Slatina neighbourhood, this shop nevertheless has an excellent stock of skiing, camping and climbing equipment.

Clothing

Denyl (Map p88; ☎ 987 3119; www.denyl.com; pl Slaveikov 7; ☎ 9am-8pm Mon-Sat, 10am-5pm Sun) One of several branches of the nationwide men's clothing chain in Sofia, offering a range of fairly conservative suits and shirts for the office plus some casual wear.

Mirela Bratova (Map p88; ☎ 980 7156; ul Ivan Shishman 4; ☎ 10.30am-8pm Mon-Fri, to 6pm Sat) Stylish women's fashions designed by Sofia couturier Mirela Bratova are on display at this little shop, including a selection of knitted dresses.

Kanela (Map p88; ☎ 0888413749; ul Neofit Rilski 59; ☎ 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, to 4pm Sat) Small boutique selling a small and changeable selection of women's clothes by young local designers, as well as a range of jewellery.

Markets & Shopping Centres

Central Hali Shopping Centre (Map p88; ☎ 917 6106; bul Maria Luisa 25; ☎ 7am-midnight) This elegant, covered market hall, built in 1911, has three floors of shops and cafés. Stalls on the ground floor

sell varied produce, including fruit, vegetables, pastries, wine and cheese. Upstairs there's a cheap food court and more shops. The centre also holds a pharmacy, post office, bank and ATMs. Despite the posted opening times, the place is invariably closed before 10pm.

City Center Sofia (Map p84; ☎ 865 7285; www.ccs-mall.com; bul Arsenalski 2; ☎ 10am-10pm) Modern shopping mall with three floors of shops, including Bulgaria's only Marks & Spencer. It also holds a supermarket, cinema, restaurants and a newsstand selling international papers and magazines.

Mall of Sofia (Map p84; ☎ 929 3377; www.mallofsofia.com; bul Stamboliyski 101; ☎ 10am-10pm) The city's newest, biggest and busiest shopping centre, filled with international brand-name stores and coffee bars. There's a big supermarket in the basement, and a cinema, IMAX screen and food court on the top floor.

Tsum Retail Centre (Map p88; ☎ 951 5266; bul Maria Luisa 2; ☎ 10am-9pm Mon-Sat, 11am-8pm Sun) The former all-in-one state department store is now an upmarket shopping mall, with five floors of pricier shops such as Laura Ashley and Tommy Hilfiger. However, it feels staid compared with the city's more modern malls and often seems to have more staff than customers.

Ladies' Market (Map p88; ul Stefan Stambolov; ☎ from 7am) The 'Zhenski Pazar' stretches several blocks along a street between ul Ekzarh Yosif and bul Slivnitsa. It's Sofia's biggest fresh-produce market, with all kinds of fruit and vegetables on sale. Other stalls sell clothes, shoes, car parts, kitchen utensils and pretty much anything else you can think of. You can buy traditional Troyanska kapka pottery much more cheaply here than in souvenir shops. It's great fun to wander around, but it does get very crowded, so watch your belongings.

Music

Tapes and CDs of Bulgarian music can be bought at souvenir shops such as those listed in the next section, and sometimes more cheaply at stalls in the underpass below the NDK, where you can also find Western and Middle Eastern pop music.

Bulgarski Kompozitor (Map p88; ul Ivan Vazov 2; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Opposite the Ivan Vazov Theatre, this small shop has a good choice of classical and folk music CDs, as well as sheet music.

Alexandra Video (Map p88; ☎ 810 2256; cnr ul Graf Ignatiev & ul Solunska; ☎ 10am-9.30pm) This bright chain store has a mixed collection of jazz, folk and pop CDs, with more space given to DVDs of Hollywood films, comics and some English-language books.

Souvenirs

Traditzia (Map p88; ☎ 981 7765; www.traditzia.bg; bul Vasil Levski 36; ☎ 11am-7pm Tue-Sat) Everything in this wonderful little store is made by 'socially excluded artisans' from the Roma and Turkish ethnic minorities and by people with disabilities whom this project aims to help become self-sufficient. On sale is a selection of traditional and contemporary Bulgarian handicrafts such as ceramics, glassware, carpets and textiles.

Centre of Folk Arts & Crafts (Map p88; ☎ 988 6416; pl Battenberg; ☎ 10am-6pm) Inside the former Royal Palace, this shop offers a huge selection of folk art, including colourful hand-woven rugs from Chiprovtsi, Troyan pottery, woodcarvings, silver jewellery and rose-oil products, as well as books and CDs of Bulgarian music. However, prices tend to be on the high side. There's another branch on ul Parizh.

Art Gallery Paris (☎ 980 8093; www.gallery-paris.com; ul Parizh 8; ☎ 11am-7pm Mon-Fri) This welcoming little art gallery showcases, and sells, the works of contemporary Bulgarian artists, with an ever-changing stock of prints, paintings and sculptures on offer.

Artists sell paintings, mainly of traditional rural scenes, near the Mineral Baths and around pl Aleksander Nevski, where you'll also find stalls selling reproduction religious icons, jewellery, souvenirs and embroidery. But be wary of the ancient coins, Soviet and Nazi paraphernalia and other 'antiques': there are some genuine items here, but most of it's fake, and prices are very much aimed at tourists. The underpass below pl Nezavisimost has several decent souvenir shops selling the usual array of postcards, paintings and books, and there are more in the underpass below the Tsum Retail Shopping Centre.

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

For information about international flights to and from Sofia, see p296.

The only domestic flights within Bulgaria are between Sofia and the Black Sea coast. Bulgaria Air flies daily to Varna (single/return

around €105/160), with two or three daily flights between July and September. Bulgaria Air also flies between the capital and Burgas (single/return around €80/130). See p301 for domestic airline contact details.

Bus

The pleasingly modern **Central Bus Station** (Sentralna Avtogara; Map p84; ☎ 090 021 000; www.centralbusstation-sofia.com; bul Maria Luisa 100), right beside the train station, is a bright, well-organised place that handles services to most big towns in Bulgaria as well as international destinations. There are dozens of counters for individual private companies, as well as an information desk and computer screens, touch-screen monitors giving details of departures, and an **OK-Supertrans taxi desk** (☎ 6am-10pm). There are cafés and shops upstairs. At the time of research, just a couple of companies were still operating from the scruffy, semi-delicat bus terminal on the opposite side of bul Maria Luisa.

Departures are less frequent between November and April. The schedules below are for the summer:

Destination	Fare	Duration	Frequency
Albena	18 lv	8hr	3-4 daily
Bansko	12 lv	3hr	5-6 daily
Blagoevgrad	7 lv	2hr	about hourly
Burgas	20 lv	7-8hr	7-10 daily
Dobrich	29 lv	7-8hr	3-4 daily
Haskovo	14 lv	6hr	12-14 daily
Kazanlak	10 lv	3½hr	6 daily
Lovech	12 lv	3hr	7-8 daily
Nesebar	28 lv	7hr	7-10 daily
Pleven	9 lv	2½hr	hourly
Plovdiv	11 lv	2½hr	several hourly
Ruse	16 lv	5hr	hourly
Sandanski	9 lv	3½hr	8-9 daily
Shumen	21 lv	6hr	hourly
Sliven	16 lv	5hr	hourly
Smolyan	18 lv	3½hr	6-7 daily
Stara Zagora	13 lv	4hr	hourly
Sveti Vlas	28 lv	8hr	5 daily
Varna	25 lv	7-8hr	every 45min
Veliko Tarnovo	14 lv	4hr	hourly
Vidin	14 lv	5hr	hourly

From the far smaller **Ovcha Kupel bus station** (Map p84; ☎ 955 5362; bul Tsar Boris III) – sometimes called the Zapad (West) station – a few buses head south, eg to Bansko, Blagoevgrad and Sandanski (although more buses to these places leave from the Central Bus Station). There are also regular buses to Dupnitsa (4 lv,

1½ hours) and Kyustendil (6 lv, two hours). If you're heading to the Rila Monastery in summer, it's worth ringing the station to ask about any direct buses. Tickets for services departing from this station must be bought at counters inside. Ovcha Kupel bus station is linked to the city centre by bus 60, tram 5 and taxi (about 4 lv one way).

From tiny **Yug bus station** (Map p84; ☎ 720 063; bul Dragan Tsankov 23), buses and minibuses leave for Samokov (4 lv, one hour, every 30 minutes 7am to 7.30pm). The station also offers an unreliable daily service (9am) direct to Maliovița (7 lv, two hours).

From the ramshackle **Poduyane bus station** (Map p84; ☎ 847 4262; ul Todorini Kukli) – aka Iztok (East) station – buses leave infrequently for small towns in central Bulgaria (schedule below).

Destination	Fare	Duration	Departure Times
Gabrovo	15 lv	3½hr	7.45am
Lovech	8 lv	3hr	7.45am
Teteven	9 lv	2½hr	8.30am, 9am & 5pm
Troyan	9 lv	3hr	9.45am, 2pm & 5pm

INTERNATIONAL

Some agencies operate at the Central Bus Station, offering services to Istanbul (40 to 45 lv, 18 hours), Athens (108 lv, 12 hours) and elsewhere, although most are now found at the **Trafik Market** (☎ 981 2979), immediately in front of the central train station. There are numerous kiosks here representing all the major companies such as **Eurolines** (☎ 981 0998) and **Group** (☎ 980 6586), which sells tickets on buses to destinations all over Europe, including Paris (190 lv), Rome (180 lv), London (260 lv), Copenhagen (250 lv) and many cities in Germany.

Eurotours (Map p84; ☎ 931 1500; basement, central train station) also sells tickets for international destinations, including twice-daily trips to Belgrade (38 lv, eight hours).

Matpu-96 (Map p84; ☎ 981 5653; Trafik Market) offers some of the best services to Greece and other Balkan countries, including Macedonia and Serbia. There is another office at ul Damyan Guev 23.

It pays to shop around though, as different companies offer different prices.

Train

The **central train station** (Map p84; ☎ 931 1111) is a massive concrete hive that has recently undergone a facelift, though it's still far from cheerful or user-friendly – if Franz Kafka had

turned his hand to architecture, this might have been the result.

Destinations for all domestic and international services are listed on timetables in Cyrillic, but departures (for the following two hours) and arrivals (for the previous two hours) are listed in English on a large computer screen on the ground floor. Directions and signs around the station are sometimes translated into French. There's a small information counter in the foyer, but nobody here speaks foreign languages. Other facilities include a post office, left-luggage office, simple cafés, a very basic hotel and accommodation agencies. The rates at the foreign exchange offices are very poor indeed, so best wait until you get into town.

Same-day tickets for destinations along the lines to Vidin, Ruse and Varna are sold at counters on the ground floor; same-day tickets to other destinations are sold in the gloomy basement, accessed via an unsigned flight of stairs obscured by another set of stairs that heads up to some snack bars. Counters are open 24 hours, but normally only a few are staffed and queues are long, so don't turn up at the last moment to purchase your ticket, and allow some extra time to work out the confusing system of platforms (ПЕРОН; indicated with Roman numerals) and tracks (КОЈЛОБО3). Advance tickets, seat reservations and sleepers for domestic services are available from a separate downstairs office (open 6am to 7.30pm Monday to Friday and 7am to 2.30pm Saturday).

The central train station is easy to reach from pl Sveta Nedelya on Trams 1, 2 and 7; by taxi (about 3 lv one way); or on foot (about 20 minutes).

All tickets for international trains, and advance tickets for domestic services, can be bought at one of several **Rila Bureaux** (www.bdz-rila.com; central train station Map p84; ☎ 932 3346; ☎ 6.30am–11pm; NDK Underpass Map p88; ☎ 965 8402; ☎ 7am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 2pm Sat; ul General Gurko Map p88; ☎ 987 0777; ul General Gurko 5; ☎ 7am–7pm Mon–Fri, to 2pm Sat). Staff at these offices usually speak some English.

Major domestic services to and from Sofia are listed in the table, opposite.

More information about the schedules and fares for other services to and from Sofia are included in the relevant Getting There & Away sections throughout this book. For more information about international services to and from Sofia, see p299.

DOMESTIC TRAIN SERVICES TO/FROM SOFIA

Destination	1st-/2nd-class fare	Duration	Number of trains (daily)
Burgas	19.60/15.70 lv (fast), 23.30/18.20 lv (express)	7–8hr	6 fast & 1 express
Gorna Oryakhovitsa	13.60/10.90 lv (fast), 16.60/13.40 lv (express)	3–6hr	6 fast, 1 express & 3 slow (for Veliko Tarnovo)
Plovdiv	8.40/6.70 lv (fast), 10.90/8.80 lv (express)	2½–3½hr	7 fast, 3 express & 8 slow
Ruse	18.10/14.50 lv	7hr	4 fast
Sandanski	9.50/7.60 lv	4hr	3 fast
Varna	23.60/19 lv (fast), 27.30/22 lv (express)	8–9hr	6 fast & 1 express
Vidin	12.90/10.30 lv (fast)	5–7hr	4 fast & 1 slow

GETTING AROUND

To/From the Airport

Sofia airport (☎ 937 2211; www.sofia-airport.bg) is located 12km southeast of the city centre. Minibus 30 shuttles between the airport and pl Nezavisimost for a flat fare of 1.50 lv; you can pick it up outside the Sheraton Hotel. Less convenient are bus 84 from Terminal 1 and bus 284 from Terminal 2 (which handles the bulk of international flights), both of which take a slow and meandering route before depositing you opposite Sofia University.

When you emerge into the arrivals hall you will immediately be greeted by taxi drivers offering you a ride into town, at often ridiculously inflated rates; bypass these and instead head to the reputable **OK-Supertrans taxi** (☎ 973 2121) office counter, where you can book an official, meter-equipped taxi. They will give you a slip of paper with the three-digit code of your cab, which will normally be immediately available. If there happen to be none available, you can try to negotiate an unmetered rate with one of the other taxis, but check the price carefully first. A taxi (using the meter) from the airport to the city centre should cost no more than 10 lv.

Car & Motorcycle

Frequent public transport, cheap taxis and horrendous traffic all provide little or no incentive to drive a private or rented car around Sofia. If you wish to explore further afield, though, a car would certainly come in handy. For more details about renting a car, see p302. Rental outlets include:

Avis (☎ 945 9224; www.avis.bg; Sofia airport)

Eurodollar (Map p88; ☎ 875 779; bul Vitoshka 25)

Hertz Central (Map p88; ☎ 980 2467; ul Rakovski 135a);

Sofia airport (☎ 945 9217)

Sixt (☎ 945 9276; Sofia airport)

Tourist Service (Map p84; ☎ 981 7253; www.tourist-service.com; ul Klukotnitsa 1)

Public Transport

The various forms of public transport – trams, buses, minibuses and trolleybuses, as well as the underground metro – run from 5am to 11.30pm every day.

A ticket on any bus, tram or trolleybus within Sofia costs 0.70 lv, or 0.80 lv from the driver. Most drivers on public transport sell tickets – make sure you have the right change – but it's far easier and quicker, especially during peak times, to buy tickets from kiosks at stops along the route before boarding.

If you plan to use public transport frequently, buy a strip of 10 tickets (6 lv) or a pass for one day (3 lv) or one month (37 lv), which are valid for all trams, buses and trolleybuses (but not the metro). All tickets must be validated by inserting them in the small machine on board; once punched, tickets are nontransferable. Inspectors will issue on-the-spot fines (7.50 lv) if you don't have a ticket; unwary foreigners are a favourite target. Don't forget to buy an extra ticket for each piece of oversized luggage, too – officially, this means anything exceeding 60cm x 40cm x 40cm.

Probably the most useful trams for visitors are 1 and 7, which link the central train station with bul Vitoshka, via pl Sveta Nedelya. Public transport routes for buses, trams and trolleybuses are indicated on Domino's *Sofia City Map*, and tram routes are marked on the excellent (free) map inside the *Sofia City Info Guide*.

Buses for Boyana, Zlatni Mostove and Aleko depart from the Hladilnika bus terminal. It is near the southern terminus of Trams 2, 4, 9 and 12 from pl Sveta Nedelya. (From the final tram stop, walk through the tiny park to the bus stop on the main road.)

Private minibuses, known as *marshroutki*, are a popular and efficient alternative to public transport, but cost slightly more

(1.50 lv per trip). Destinations and fares are indicated (in Cyrillic) on the front of the minibus; pay the driver upon boarding. There are 49 routes in operation, with most services running between the city centre and the outlying suburbs. Routes of interest to travellers include 30, which goes to the airport; 5, which goes to the central train station; 21, which runs to Boyana; and 41, to Simeonovo.

At the time of research, Sofia's metro system (www.metropolitan.bg) had only one line, running between the western residential suburb of Obelya and the city centre (Serdica station), although construction was underway on expanding the line, which will eventually cross the city to the southeastern suburb of Mladost. The first of the new stations, including one near Sofia University, should be in operation by 2008. Metro tickets cost 0.70 lv per trip and cannot be used on other forms of public transport.

Taxi

Taxis are an affordable and easier alternative to public transport. By law, taxis must use meters, but those that wait around the airport, luxury hotels and within 100m of pl Sveta Nedelya will often try to negotiate an unmetered fare – which, of course, will be considerably more than the metered fare. All official taxis are yellow, have fares per kilometre displayed in the window, and have obvious taxi signs (in English or Bulgarian) on top. Never accept a lift in a private, unlicensed vehicle, because you will (at best) pay too much or (at worst) be robbed.

The rates per kilometre may range enormously from one taxi company to another, but the standard rate is 0.59 lv per minute in the daytime, 0.70 lv per minute at night.

In the very unlikely event that you can't find a taxi, you can order one by ringing **OK-Supertrans** (☎ 973 2121) or **Yes Taxi** (☎ 91 119). You will need to speak Bulgarian.

AROUND SOFIA

The places mentioned here are accessible from Sofia by public transport, but beyond Boyana, it's worth staying at least one night to avoid excessive travel and to really appreciate the surroundings.

BOYANA БОЯНА

☎ 02

Boyana is a peaceful and prosperous suburb of Sofia, lying around 8km south of the city centre. Once a favourite retreat for communist leaders and apparatchiks, these days it's home to Sofia's wealthy elite and two of the capital's major attractions. However, besides these there's little else to detain you.

Sights

NATIONAL MUSEUM OF HISTORY

Housed in the former presidential palace, the **National Museum of History** (☎ 955 7604; www.historymuseum.org; ul Vitoshko Lale 16; admission 10 lv, with Boyana Church 12 lv, guided tour 20 lv; ☎ 9.30am-5.30pm) is Bulgaria's most hyped museum, though it's hardly in the most convenient of locations, and unless a coach party happens to turn up, you may have the place to yourself. However, it does occupy quite a stunning setting, and as a bonus you get to see the overblown splendour in which the old communist leadership once lived and held court.

A grand stairway sweeps up to the 1st floor, where the exhibitions begin. The star of the show is undoubtedly the fabulous 4th-century-BC Thracian gold treasure from Panagyurishte, with its *rhyta* (drinking cups) in the form of animal heads. Frustratingly though, this, along with other major exhibits, seems to spend a lot of time on loan abroad. There are more Thracian and Roman artefacts on display, as well as Greek pottery from the Black Sea region and lots of reproductions of treasures kept elsewhere. Also on this floor is a large, 16th-century fresco from a church in Arbanasi showing demons gleefully torturing naked sinners, and uniforms and paraphernalia from the 1876 April Uprising.

Upstairs, you can look over a gallery of icons and traditional folk costumes; temporary exhibitions are also held here. Outside, there's a collection of ancient tombstones on show alongside a few Russian MiG fighters.

BOYANA CHURCH

The tiny, 13th-century **Boyana Church** (☎ 959 0939; www.boyanachurch.org; ul Boyansko Ezero 3; admission 10 lv, with National Museum of History 12 lv; ☎ 9am-5pm Tue-Sun) is around 2km south of the museum. It's on Unesco's World Heritage list and is Bulgaria's most cherished and revered historic monument. The 90 murals, which date from 1259, are rare survivors from that period,

and are among the very finest examples of Bulgarian medieval artwork. They include the oldest known portrait of St John of Rila, along with representations of King Konstantin Asen and Queen Irina. Decades of painstaking restoration were finally completed in 2006, so visitors can now enjoy the church in all its glory. Taking photos of the interior is not permitted.

Getting There & Away

Minibus 21 runs to Boyana from the city centre (pick it up on bul Vasil Levski). It will drop you right outside the gates of the museum and also connects the museum with Boyana Church. You can also take bus 63 from pl Ruski Pаметnik, or bus 64 from the Hladilnika terminal. Signs advertising the museum line the motorway, but it's not easy to spot the building, which is set back from the road behind a screen of trees. A taxi (about 6 lv one way) from the city centre to the museum is probably the easiest option of all; for the museum, ask for the 'Residentsia Boyana'.

VITOSHA NATURE PARK ПРИРОДЕН ПАРК ВИТОША

☎ 02

The Mt Vitoshka range, 23km long and 13km wide, lies just south of the city; it's sometimes referred to as the 'lungs of Sofia' for the refreshing breezes it deflects onto the often polluted capital. The mountain is part of the 22,726-hectare **Vitoshka Nature Park** (www.park-vitoshka.org), the oldest of its kind in Bulgaria (created in 1934). The highest point is Mt Cherni Vrah (Black Peak; 2290m), the fourth-highest peak in Bulgaria, where temperatures in January can fall to -8°C.

As well as being a popular ski resort in winter, the nature park is popular with hikers, picnickers and sightseers on summer weekends, and receives around 1.5 million visitors a year. There are dozens of clearly marked hiking trails, a few hotels, cafés and restaurants and numerous huts and chalets that can be booked through the Bulgarian Tourist Union (see p282).

Aleko АЛЕКО elevation 1800m

Aleko was named in honour of the renowned writer Aleko Konstantinov, who kick-started the hiking craze back in 1895 when he led a party of 300 fellow outdoors enthusiasts

to the top of Mt Cherni Vrah. On summer weekends, the area is crammed with picnic-ing families and hikers.

Zlatni Mostove ЗЛАТНИ МОСТОВЕ elevation 1400m

Zlatni Mostove (Golden Bridges) takes its name from the bubbly little stream here, known as the Stone River, which was once a popular site for gold-panning. The trail of mammoth boulders running along its length was dumped here by glaciers during the Ice Age. It's another very popular spot on summer weekends, but at other times you may have the place to yourself. It's accessible cheaply by bus 261 from Ovcha Kupel bus station every 20 minutes on Saturday and Sunday, less frequently on weekdays. A taxi from the city centre will cost about 20 lv one way.

Dragalevtsi Драгалевци

A two-person **chairlift** starts about 5km (by road) up from the centre of Dragalevtsi village (though it's about 3km on foot if you take the obvious short cut up the hill). One chairlift (2 lv, 20 minutes) goes as far as Bai Krástyo, from where another (2 lv, 15 minutes) carries on to Goli Vrah (1837m). Both lifts operate year-round, but most reliably from about 8.30am to 6.30pm, Friday to Sunday.

A pleasant option is to take the chairlift to Goli Vrah, walk to Aleko (30 minutes) and catch the gondola down to Simeonovo (or vice versa).

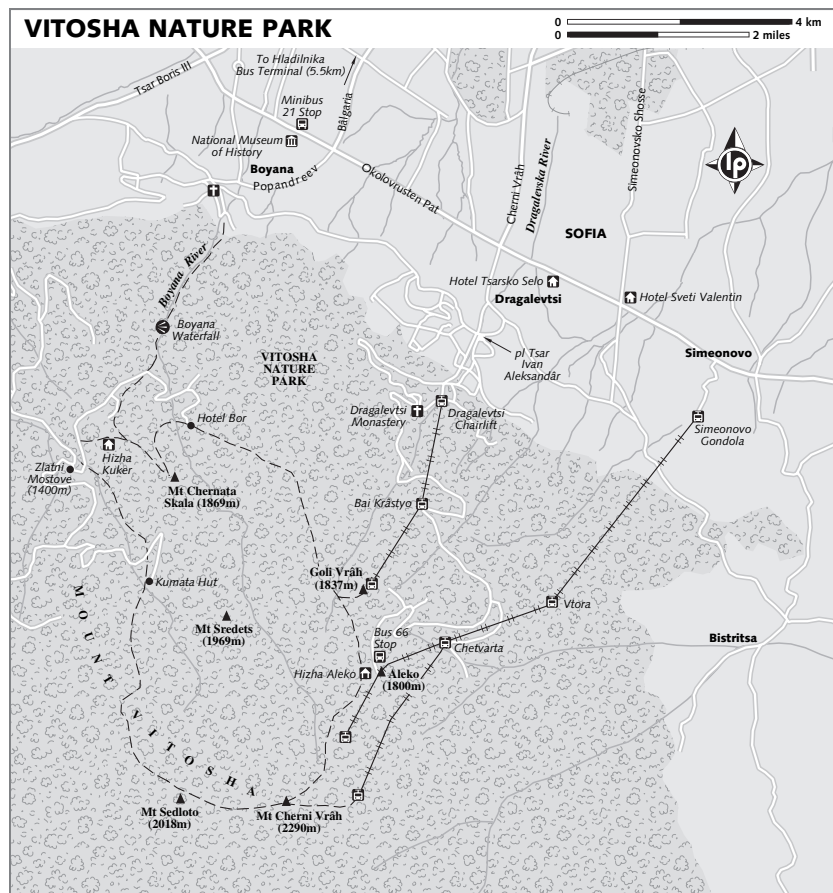
From the start of the chairlift, a well-marked trail (about 1km) leads to **Dragalevtsi Monastery**. Probably the oldest extant monastery in Bulgaria, it was built around 1345, but abandoned only 40 years later. The monastery contains colourful murals and is revered as one of the many hiding places of the ubiquitous anti-Turkish rebel leader Vasil Levski.

Ploshtad Tsar Ivan Aleksandár in Dragalevtsi village has a number of cafés and traditional restaurants. There are also places to eat and drink along the road from the village to the chairlift.

Buses 64 and 93 from the Hladilnika terminal go to the village centre; bus 93 continues on to the chairlift.

Simeonovo СИМЕОНОВО

Take a gondola to the mountains from Simeonovo (3/5 lv one way/return, 30 minutes). It operates Friday to Sunday from



9am to 6.30pm (1 October to 31 March) and 8.30am to 6pm (1 May to 30 September). You can jump off at the junctions of Vtora or Chetvarta, from where hiking trails lead deep into the park – and then continue the trip later with the same ticket. Bus 123 from the Hladilnitsa terminal goes directly to the gondola station.

Activities

HIKING

The best map is probably *Vitoshka Turisticheska Karta* (1:50,000), printed in Cyrillic and available at bookshops around central Sofia.

Some of the shorter and more popular hikes around the park:

Aleko–Goli Vrah A short trail (30 minutes) between the top of the gondola from Simeonovo and the chairlift from Dragalevtsi.

Aleko–Mt Cherni Vrah A popular, but steep, 90 minutes on foot. Alternatively, take the chairlift from Aleko to within 30 minutes' walk of the summit.

Aleko–Zlatni Mostove Follow the trail to Goli Vrah, skirt around Mt Sredets (1969m) and pass Hotel Bor; about three hours.

Boyana Church–Zlatni Mostove At the church, ask for directions to the path that hugs the Boyana River and leads to the 15m-high Boyana Waterfall (best in winter). From there, obvious paths lead to Zlatni Mostove; about three hours in total.

Dragalevtsi Chairlift–Goli Vrah Follow the chairlift from the bottom; a three-hour steep climb.

Zlatni Mostove–Mt Cherni Vrah A challenging hike, via Kumata Hut and Mt Sedloto (2018m); about three hours.

SKIING

At 1800m above sea level, Mt Vitoshka is Bulgaria's highest ski resort and its six slopes are only 22km from the centre of Sofia. There is rarely enough snow here before mid-December, but the season can often last into April.

The 29km of alpine ski runs (the longest is about 5km) range from easy to very difficult, and start as high as Mt Cherni Vrah. Cross-country skiing is ideal along the 15km of trails, and snowboarding is also possible. As well as the Simeonovo gondola and Dragalevtsi chairlift there is a handful of other chairlifts and draglifts. A one-day lift pass costs 25 lv.

However, Mt Vitoshka gets very crowded on weekends, the slopes are not always well maintained and the quantity and quality of ski equipment for hire is not great because so many locals use their own gear. The ski-rental shop at the start of the Simeonovo gondola and the Aleko Ski Centre at Aleko both charge about €14 per day for a set of ski gear. A snowboard and boots also cost €14 per day, and a sledage €4.

The ski school at Aleko caters mainly to Bulgarians but instructors are multilingual. Five-day ski courses (four hours per day) are offered for €70. The website www.skivitoshka.com may be useful for those who read Bulgarian.

Sleeping & Eating

In Vitoshka Nature Park there are several modern hotels, which are usually much cheaper than those in the city centre. Ideally, though, you'll need your own transport to stay out here. Hikers can stay at any of the numerous mountain huts.

Hizha Aleko (☎ 967 1113; dm 10 lv, s/d with shared bathroom 15/25 lv) This hut offers a number of basic rooms with two to eight beds.

Hizha Kuker (☎ 955 4955; www.kukerbg.com; r from 25 lv; 🍴) One of the newer, more comfortable 'huts', this one has 10 rooms with bathrooms and an on-site restaurant.

Hotel Sveti Valentin (☎ 860 1399; www.hotelsvalentin.com; bul Simeonovsko Shosse 80; s/d/tr €49/54/69; 🍴 🚰 🚿) A modern, reasonably priced option in Simeonovo, the Sveti Valentin has a wide range of rooms available and a pleasant garden restaurant. Lunch and dinner can be arranged for between €6 to €10 extra.

Hotel Tsarsko Selo (☎ 816 0101; www.tsarskoselo.com; Oklovrusten Pat; s/d/apt from €80/100/130; 🍴 🚰 🚿) At the base of Mt Vitoshka, this vast, upmarket hotel complex offers a variety of large rooms and villas (€108). On-site facilities include a restaurant, gym, sauna, Turkish bath, indoor and outdoor pools and even a football pitch; there's also a casino. The hotel has its own airport shuttle bus, too.

Getting There & Away

To Aleko, bus 66 (2.50 lv) departs from Sofia's Hladilnitsa terminal 10 times a day between 8am and 7.45pm on Saturday and Sunday, and four times a day on weekdays. Minibus 41 runs from Sofia city centre to Simeonovo (1.50 lv).

KYUSTENDIL КЮСТЕНДИЛ

☎ 078 / pop 56,500

Kyustendil, 90km southwest of Sofia, has been famous for its curative mineral springs since Thracian times, although it was the Romans who built up the site into a major city, which they called Pautalia, in the 2nd century AD. Under the Byzantines it was re-named Velbâzhid, growing into an important religious and military centre, and in the late 14th century it briefly became the seat of an independent principality, ruled over by the brothers John and Constantine Dragash. The town's present name derives from the Turkish for 'Constantine's Land'.

The sunny climate and mineral springs still draw tourists from across Bulgaria, and it's an agreeable, relaxed provincial town with a café-filled pedestrian centre and a handful of sights worth a look. For visitors, Kyustendil is a common transit point for travel to and from Macedonia, and a relatively easy day trip from Sofia.

Bulevard Bulgaria is the shady pedestrian lane that links the train station (and adjacent bus station) with pl Velbâzhid, the central square.

Sights

Although small, the two-roomed **City History Museum** (☎ 26 396; bul Bulgaria 55; admission free; 🕒 10am-noon & 1-5pm Mon-Fri) houses an intriguing array of archaeological artefacts from the locality, including Neolithic tools, some impressive Thracian armour excavated from a burial mound, and a reconstructed Thracian chariot. Votive tablets and statuettes of Zeus and Hera

from Roman-era temples and medieval jewelery are also on display.

The **Vladimir Dimitrov Art Gallery** (☎ 22 503; ul Patriarh Evtimii 20; admission 1 lv; 🕒 9am-noon & 2-6pm Tue-Sun) is about 150m north of pl Velbâzhhd, just off ul Han Krum. It houses over 200 works of art over two floors, mostly by Dimitrov, also known as 'The Master', who grew up in Kyustendil. A number of self-portraits are on show, along with many examples of his favourite images of young maidens surrounded by fruit and flowers. Labelling is in Bulgarian only.

On the southern side of pl Velbâzhhd is the **Metropolitan Church of the Assumption** (ul Demokratiya), an unusual wooden structure built slightly below ground level in 1816 and sporting three squat octagonal towers, which let in light to the dark interior, with its carved wooden pulpit, iconostasis and murals painted by Ivan Dospevski. It's set in pretty gardens, with a separate belltower at the front.

Also worth a look is the 16th-century **Ahmed Bey Mosque** (ul Stefan Karadzha), about 300m east of pl Velbâzhhd. No longer a place of worship, it occasionally hosts archaeological exhibitions. It perches on top of the scant, largely rebuilt ruins of the 2nd-century-AD **Roman thermae**, located below present ground level and not accessible to visitors (though you can look over the railings).

On top of the forested **Hisarlâk Hill**, about 2km south of pl Velbâzhhd, are ruins of the 2nd-century **ancient fortress** from the Roman city of Pautalia.

Sleeping & Eating

Hotel Velbâzhhd (☎ 520 246; pautalia_tours@esnet.bg; bul Bulgaria 46; s/d unrenovated 20/35 lv, renovated 50/60 lv; 📍) Close to the bus and train stations, this concrete tower is divided into older and newer sections. The old rooms are pretty basic, though still clean and reasonably comfortable, but it's worth paying more for the 'renovated' rooms. All rooms have TVs, fridges and balconies, and rates include breakfast. The hotel also offers various balneological treatments.

Hotel Lavega (☎ 523 488; ul Tsar Asen 18; s/d 27/34 lv) Close to the Roman thermae, the Lavega is a neat, small guesthouse with a few basic rooms above a café of the same name.

The main pedestrian thoroughfare, bul Bulgaria, is lined with numerous restaurants, including **Gostilinita Batenberg** (☎ 50 344; bul Bulgaria; mains from 3 lv), a few steps north of pl Velbâzhhd, which offers an English menu of grills, salads, omelettes and sausage-and-chips type dishes.

Getting There & Away

Buses leave from the Ovcha Kupel bus station in Sofia (6 lv, two hours) every 30 minutes for the **Kyustendil bus station** (☎ 22 626). From Kyustendil, six daily buses go to Blagoevgrad, eight depart for Dupnitsa and one travels to Plovdiv. Buses also leave daily for Skopje in Macedonia (around 30 lv, 11.30am). Tickets are sold at the **Matpu-96** (☎ 50 245) counter. From the adjacent **train station** (☎ 26 041), two fast trains (1st/2nd class, 6.80/5.40 lv; two hours 20 minutes) and three slow passenger trains travel every day to Sofia.