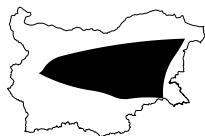


Central Bulgaria



Bulgaria's central heartland, divided in two by the rolling Stara Planina mountain range, is the place of greatest importance to the country's turbulent modern history and the people and events that shaped the nation. Reminders of this past abound in gorgeous towns such as Lovech and Koprivshitsa, filled with National Revival-period architecture, and at sites of key military victories such as the Shipka Pass. Stunning artistic achievements including the vivid church frescoes of the monasteries at Dryanovo and Troyan and the incredibly detailed masterwork of the 19th-century Tryavna school of woodcarvers attest to the vitality of Bulgarian tradition, and the region's innumerable house-museums preserve the spirit (and wonderful worldly goods) of the freedom fighters and other eminent Bulgarians of yesteryear.

The natural beauty of central Bulgaria, which can be experienced through hiking, climbing, caving, horseback riding and other outdoor activities, has everything to do with its mountain ranges – the Stara Planina and the Sredna Gora, sprawling just to the southeast – and the waterfalls, cliffs, caves and rivers that run through them. At the same time, the lowlands beckon with romantic locales such as the Valley of Roses, near Kazanlak, long famous for its rose oil production.

For many visitors, however, the distilled essence of the central Bulgaria experience comes down to one place: Veliko Târnovo, the magnificent former capital of the Bulgarian tsars, built along rolling hills and bisected by a river, with one of the most impressive fortresses in Europe standing proudly over it. Târnovo's exuberant existence as host to Bulgaria's second-largest university also allows it to boast the best nightlife in central Bulgaria.

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Magical atmosphere**
Absorb the fairy-tale castle, churches and old quarters of Veliko Târnovo (p170)
- **Powerful paintings**
See the frescoes of legendary Zahari Zograf at Troyan Monastery (p190)
- **Age-old artistry**
Marvel at the hand-carved wood iconostases of the 'Tryavna school' in the pretty town of Tryavna (p183)
- **Mountain meandering**
Hike Bulgaria's grand 'old mountains' – Stara Planina (p188)
- **Pure Balkans**
Dive into the dusty, garrulous open market in ethnically mixed Kazanlak (p198)



SHUMEN ШУМЕН

☎ 054 / pop 86,660

There's an awful lot of concrete in Shumen, but it does make its own beer, Shumensko Pivo. Not only that, this somewhat faded but friendly industrial city full of communist memorials is crowned by a striking medieval fortress, and has a surprisingly wide range of eateries and drinking spots. Several museums, a park and a lengthy pedestrian mall where the locals stroll and sip coffee round out the local attractions.

Recent additions on the sleeping scene have also brought fancier, though still quite affordable, accommodation to town, making Shumen an even more comfortable base for day trips to the towns of Veliki Preslav, Madara (p169) and even Kotel (p209). The city's location, at the base of a low spur of the Stara Planina ranges, about halfway between the Black Sea coast and the Danube, also means it's within a couple of hours' drive of several unique destinations.

For information on local winery tours, see p66.

History

Thracians and then Romans originally settled and fortified Shumen. After the migration of the Turkic Bulgars in the 6th century, nearby Veliki Preslav and Pliska became the centres of the medieval Bulgarian kingdom. In 1388, the Ottomans captured Shumen, renaming it Chumla. It became an important market town and, in the final days of Ottoman domination, part of the Turks' strategic quadrangle (along with Ruse, Silistra and Varna) of towns fortified to defend against Russian advances in 1877. Reminders of Ottoman multi-ethnicity remain with Shumen's minority Jewish, Armenian and Muslim communities.

Orientation

The bus station and adjacent train station are at Shumen's eastern end. The long pedestrian mall, bul Slavyanski, stretches from the city park to the main square, pl Osvobozhdenie. Most services, cafés and restaurants are on or around the mall and square.

Information

Biochim Commercial Bank (bul Slavyanski)

Helikon (☎ 800 103; bul Slavyanski 88; ☎ 9am-8pm)

Has a few English-language books on Bulgaria and maps.

Internet Café (ul Hristo Botev)

Post office (pl Osvobozhdenie; ☎ 7am-10pm Mon-Fri)

SG Ekspres Bank (pl Osvobozhdenie; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Has an ATM and does Western Union money transfers.

Telephone centre Inside the post office.

Unicredit Bulbank (bul Slavyanski; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri)

United Bulgarian Bank (ul Tsar Osvoboditel)

Sights

SHUMEN FORTRESS

Towering over the city from a steep hillside, the **Shumen Fortress** (☎ 858 051; adult/student 3/1.50 lv; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Oct, 8.30am-5pm Nov-Mar) dates originally to the early Iron Age. It was augmented and reinforced by the Thracians in the 5th century BC, and between the 2nd and 4th centuries AD, the Romans added towers and more walls. It was again fortified later on by the Byzantines, who made it an important garrison. During the Second Bulgarian Empire (1185-1396), the fortress was one of north-east Bulgaria's most significant settlements, renowned for its pottery and metalwork. However, invading Ottomans in the late 14th century burnt and looted the fortress.

Wandering the fortress is fun, with notice boards dotted around the site. A yellowing information booklet (2 lv) is also available at the gate. The fortress is about 5.5km up from the mosque. A taxi costs about 3.50 lv one way.

From the fortress entrance, a 3km path leads to the gigantic Creators of the Bulgarian State Monument, which then brings you to the city centre.

CREATORS OF THE BULGARIAN STATE MONUMENT

This massive, Soviet-era hilltop monument was built in 1981 to commemorate the First Bulgarian Empire's 1300th anniversary. To get here on foot, climb the staircase behind the History Museum. The 3km path leads from the equally communist **Partisan's Monument**. The circuitous 5km road going there starts along ul Sv Karel Shkorpil at the History Museum. Go by taxi (3.50 lv one way), and then just walk back down the steps leading to the city centre.

Shumen's **Information Centre** (☎ 852 598; admission 3 lv; ☎ 8.30am-5pm winter, 8am-7pm summer), about 300m from the Creators of the Bulgarian State Monument, has information about the structure and surrounding flora. A 3km path passes the Information Centre and car park, finishing at Shumen Fortress.