



Understand Bulgaria

BULGARIA TODAY442

Joining the EU gave Bulgarians a confidence boost, and the country's profile as a tourism destination has continued to grow.

HISTORY444

From feisty Thracians and Bulgars to Greek colonisers and invading Romans, Byzantines and Turks, Bulgarians certainly have an eventful past

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES & WILDLIFE454

Bulgaria is almost tailor-made for the outdoors enthusiast. Hiking, climbing, skiing, scuba diving or birdwatching – you can try them all here.

VISUAL ARTS, CRAFTS & MUSIC.....460

Centuries of devotion have produced beautiful icons and murals adorning Bulgarian churches, while traditional folk music is truly joyous.

THE BULGARIAN PEOPLE.....463

The Bulgarians are proud of their Slavic heritage and are sociable, laid-back people, who never miss a chance to party.

BULGARIAN WINE465

They've been making wine here for thousands of years, and there are excellent varieties to sample all round the country.

BULGARIAN CUISINE468

Head to a traditional *mehana* (tavern) and try some tasty specialities like chicken *kavarma* or a bowl of chilled *tarator*.



population per sq km



Bulgaria Today

National Interests

In joining the European Union in 2007, Bulgaria achieved the greatest goal of its post-communist incarnation. Bulgarians were rightly proud of this achievement, though any lingering euphoria has long since dissipated – no economic miracles have occurred, and the prevalence of decrepit and destroyed old communist-era factories by the roadsides hardly conjures up images of European affluence.

Yet there are signs of change too – the smoking ban in restaurants and bars, for example, is respected much more widely here than in neighbouring Romania, which also joined the EU in 2007. Sofia's expanding metro system now covers much of the city, making the capital easier to enjoy. And signs of 'progress' – which in 2013 included a projected 10 new shopping malls in Sofia alone – indicate that today's Bulgarians are happily drifting ever further from their former communist island.

Indeed, despite chronic complaints over the economy and corruption at high levels, Bulgarians have retained their wry sense of humour. One riotous example occurred in June 2011, when an unknown street artists gave an old Soviet fighters monument a makeover, repainting the figures as modern 'heroes' – Superman, Santa Claus, Ronald McDonald and more. Two years later, some of the paint can still be seen.

Bulgarians have always been considered a clever bunch in the scientific field. Early breakthroughs in robotics and computer sciences were made here and, most recently, the government announced a 10-year project to develop a national nanotechnology research and development centre in Sofia – making Bulgaria the first European country to do so. Oh, and to keep abreast of climate change developments Bulgaria keeps its own scientific research station – in Antarctica.

- » Population: 7.35 million
- » Area: 42,823 sq km
- » GDP per capita: 15,981 lev (US \$10,700)
- » Inflation: 7.3%
- » Literacy rate: 98.2%
- » Ethnicity (2011): 84.8% Bulgarian, 8.8% Turkish, 4.9% Roma, 1.5% other

Habits

- » Bulgarians say yes by nodding their head – from side to side.
- » Wait staff in most restaurants don't usually serve bread unless you ask for it – and most don't expect tips either.
- » As in other Orthodox Christian countries, the more devout may cross themselves three times when passing a church, and they also try to never exit a church with your back to the interior.

Top Music

Le Mystere des Voix Bulgares (1990) A now-legendary set of recordings from the national female choir.

Song of the Crooked Dance: Early Bulgarian Traditional Music 1927–42 A rare collection of vintage traditional tracks.