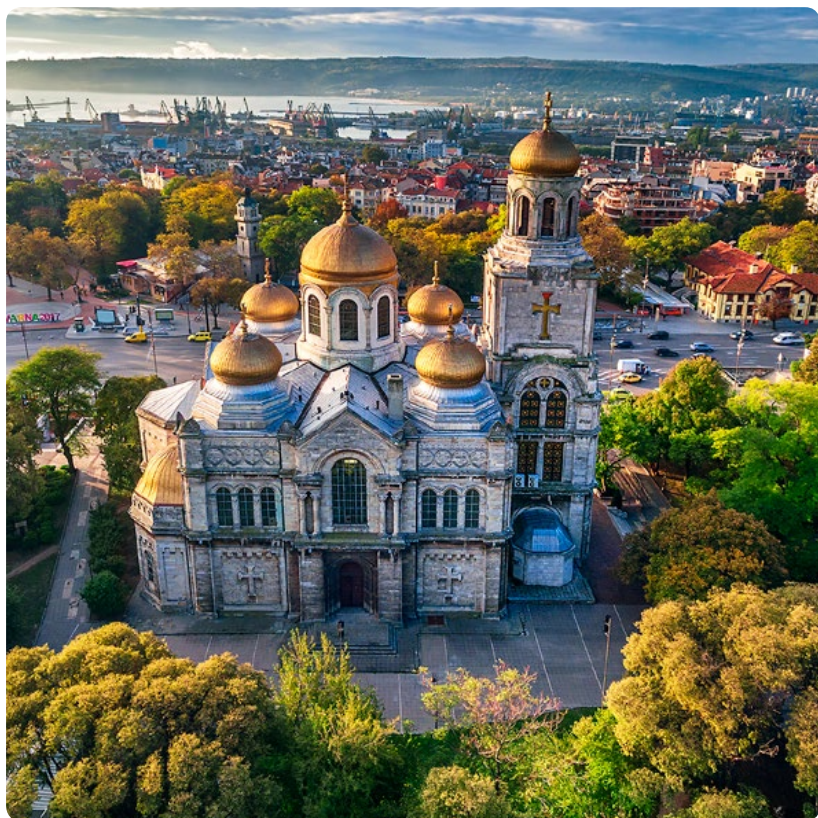


Bulgaria



VALENTIN VALKOV / SHUTTERSTOCK ©

Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin (p417), Varna

Welcome to Bulgaria

Soul-stirring mountains rival golden beaches, while cities hum with nightlife and art. Within Bulgaria's beguiling blend of nature and history, unforgettable adventures are guaranteed.

Black Sea Beaches

Long, sandy beaches and fine weather reel Bulgarians into Black Sea resorts each summer. Foreign visitors, too, are wise to Bulgaria's coast, thanks to gorgeous seaside resorts such as Primorsko (and prices that compete well with Western Europe). Even the coast's two big cities, Varna and Burgas, have attractive beaches within minutes of their urban hearts. And while Sunny Beach, Sozopol and other favourites are thoroughly developed, there are still plenty of undiscovered coves.

Churches & Religious Art

No visitor to Bulgaria can fail to be impressed by its religious art, from vast gold-domed churches to miniature icon paintings. Sofia's Aleksander Nevski Church and 10th-century Rila Monastery draw visitors and pilgrims galore, while Tryavna's wood carvings and Bachkovo's apocalyptic murals are gathering fame. But Orthodox churches in even the tiniest villages have much to admire: emotive paintings of saints, often set in carved wooden screens (iconostases), appear magical when bathed in flickering candlelight. Almost as spectacular are the settings of many sacred buildings: granite cliffs, thrashing streams and lonely mountain passes.

Mountains & Forests

Bulgaria's untamed landscapes quicken the pulse of hikers, mountain bikers and skiers. Seven mountain ranges ripple across the country; glacial lakes sparkle, and tangles of forest conceal wolves, bears and lynx, a glimpse of Europe's primeval past. Networks of trails and *hizhas* (hiking huts) allow access to such raw beauty as mist-cloaked panoramas in the Stara Planina range and sunrise from Bulgaria's second-highest peak, Mt Vihren (2915m). Between trekking among Rodopi villages, thundering across ski fields in Bansko or birdwatching in Pirin National Park, Bulgaria has much to delight (and exhaust) lovers of the great outdoors.

Ancient History

Whispers of history emanate from Bulgaria's fortresses and ruins. Caves secreted in hold traces of Neolithic settlements. The Thracians left behind hauls of gold, and tombs that can still be explored. The Romans built breathtaking cities, the remains of which sit in the midst of modern cities such as Varna and Plovdiv. Tsars strutted along the ramparts of Tsarevets Fortress at former capital Veliko Târnovo. And these histories are no less relevant today, with Thracian art and Bulgaria's victory over the Ottomans continuing to inspire.