

Understand Bulgaria

BULGARIA TODAY444

The EU is losing its lustre, and accusations of political corruption grumble on. But among younger people, there's still plenty of reason to feel optimistic about modern Bulgaria.

HISTORY446

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

OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES & WILDLIFE456

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

VISUAL ARTS, CRAFT & MUSIC462

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

THE BULGARIAN PEOPLE466

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

BULGARIAN WINE468

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

BULGARIAN CUISINE470

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

Bulgaria Today

With a proliferation of new cultural projects and vacillating feelings about its EU membership, Bulgaria's social and political landscape is rapidly evolving. Sceptics feel Bulgaria's new dawn as part of the EU is losing its lustre; meanwhile accusations of political corruption grumble on. But among young people, there's plenty of reason to feel optimistic about modern Bulgaria.

Best on Film

The World is Big & Salvation Lurks around the Corner (2008) A man takes his amnesiac grandson on a journey to rediscover the past.

The Goat Horn (1972) Harrowing tale of revenge in Ottoman-occupied Bulgaria.

Peach Thief (1964) An evocative romance between a Bulgarian Army officer and a prisoner, set during WWI.

Best in Print

Street Without a Name: Childhood & Other Misadventures in Bulgaria (Kapka Kassabova; 2008) Thought-provoking memoir of a young woman's experiences in communism's last years.

Circus Bulgaria (Deyan Enev; 2010) Surrealist collection of stories based on Bulgarian legends and oddities.

The Porcupine (Julian Barnes; 1992) The former ruler of a fictional post-communist country goes on trial.

Best in Music

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

Gadna Poroda by Azis (2011) The best *chalga* (Bulgarian pop-folk) album by the country's biggest star.

Song of the Crooked Dance (1927–42) A collection of vintage folk songs and traditional dances.

Growing Pains

Accession to the EU in 2007 was a crowning achievement for post-communist Bulgaria. But years later, Bulgarians regard their progress with a thoughtful eye. In 2015 Bulgaria had the lowest GDP in the EU, and an International Day of Happiness survey found Bulgarians with Europe's lowest levels of contentment. High fuel prices – which formed part of the bitter groundswell of protests that toppled Boyko Borisov's first term as prime minister in 2013 – continue to hinder small businesses.

Along with Romania, Bulgaria's first few years of EU membership were subject to migration controls. These were lifted in 2014, allowing Bulgarians to work permit-free across the EU. But after years of being held at arm's length by longer-term EU members, the country now finds itself wrestling with the thorny topic of migration into Bulgaria. An 80km wire fence was built along the Bulgaria-Turkey border in 2016, a crude attempt to curb illegal migration; at the time of writing, there were plans for a fence along the Greek border, too.

Freedom of movement has turned out to be a double-edged sword. Young Bulgarians thrive on their new-found mobility, many choosing to work abroad in Spain, Germany, Italy and beyond. The older generation are increasingly unnerved by the trend, some claiming they are unable to find young Bulgarians to work in small businesses at home. Others blame Bulgarian gloom on the fragmentation of families, a by-product of ambitious Bulgarians roving elsewhere to earn money.

Positive effects in recent years mustn't be overlooked. An injection of EU funding for cultural treasures, Sofia's expanded metro system, Plovdiv being crowned European Capital of Culture 2019, the