

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 **Odysseia-In** (Map p88; ☎ 989 0538; www.odysseia-in.com; 1st fl, bul Stamboliyski 20-V); also see p86.