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europe – at a glance

One of the most rewarding things about travelling through Europe is the rich variety of cuisine, customs, architecture and history. Adding to this variety is the number of very different languages you'll encounter on your travels. Most languages spoken in Europe, including English, belong to what's known as the Indo-European language family, believed to have originally developed from one language spoken thousands of years ago. A number of European languages are represented in Roman script, which can make them a little more accessible for English-speaking travellers. Other alphabets in use include Cyrillic (used for Russian, for example) and Greek. They can be a little confusing, given their vaguely (and often misleadingly) recognisable shapes, but learning their scripts is easily achievable.

The Romance languages (French, Italian, Spanish and Portuguese) all developed from Vulgar Latin, which spread through Western Europe during the rule of the Roman Empire. The freedom with which English has borrowed Latin-based vocabulary means you'll quickly recognise many words from these languages. The Germanic languages – Dutch and German – are more closely related to English. The Scandinavian languages form the northern branch of the Germanic languages tree, having developed from Old Norse, the language of the Vikings. Their big advantage is that, being so closely related, once you've got the hang of one language, the others should seem quite familiar. Greek, the language of the Iliad and the Odyssey, forms a single branch of the Indo-European language family and uses Greek script.

The Slavic languages are a branch of the Indo-European language family and share a large amount of basic vocabulary. They originated north of the Carpathian mountains and are now divided into Eastern (Russian), Western (Czech and Polish) and Southern (Bulgarian and Croatian) subgroups. The languages traditionally associated with the Orthodox Church (Russian, Bulgarian and Macedonian) use Cyrillic alphabet, while those influenced by the Catholic Church (Czech, Slovak, Polish, Croatian and Slovene) use Roman alphabet. Romanian, the only representative of the Romance languages in Eastern Europe, is more closely related to French, Italian or Spanish.

Finally, Turkish and Hungarian are part of the Ural-Altaic language family, which includes languages spoken from the Balkan Peninsula to northeast Asia.

Bulgarian

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bulgarian alphabet

А а a	Б б buh	В в vuh	Г г guh	Д д duh
Е е e	Ж ж zhuh	З з zuh	И и ee	Й й ee krat-ko
К к kuh	Л л luh	М м muh	Н н nuh	О о o
П п puh	Р р ruh	С с suh	Т т tuh	У у oo
Ф ф fuh	Х х huh	Ц ц tsuh	Ч ч chuh	Ш ш shuh
Щ щ shtuh	Ъ ъ uh	Ь ь er ma-luhk	Ю ю yoo	Я я ya

bulgarian



about Bulgarian

Surprisingly, the name of the oldest South Slavic literary language, Bulgarian (български *buhl-gar-skee*), isn't of Slavic origin. It's one of a handful of words remaining in Bulgarian from the language of the Bulgars, a Turkic people who invaded the eastern Balkans in the late 7th century. Together with their language, they were assimilated by the local Slavs, who had crossed the Danube and settled in the peninsula at the start of the 6th century.

As a member of the South Slavic group of languages, Bulgarian has Macedonian and Serbian as its closest relatives. However, it also shows similarities with the non-Slavic languages in the so-called Balkan linguistic union (Romanian, Albanian and Greek), as a result of multilingualism and interaction among the Balkan nations. These foreign influences explain many of its grammatical features – for example, the lack of noun cases, which sets Bulgarian (and Macedonian) apart from the other Slavic languages. In addition, numerous Turkish words entered the Bulgarian vocabulary during five centuries of Ottoman rule. During the 19th century, many of the loanwords from Turkish were eliminated from the language. Their place was partially filled by Russian words, as Russian has influenced Bulgarian through both Bulgaria's ties with the Orthodox Church and long-standing cultural ties with Russia.

Old Bulgarian (also known as Old Church Slavonic) was the first Slavic language recorded in written form, in religious literature from the 9th century. The central figures in the development of the Slavic literary language were Saints Cyril and Methodius, Byzantine Orthodox missionaries who invented the Glagolitic alphabet around 863 AD and used it to translate Greek liturgical texts into Old Church Slavonic. Their disciples devised the Cyrillic alphabet (based on Greek and Glagolitic) in which Bulgarian has been written ever since. In its modern version, standardised after the last spelling reform in 1945, it's very similar to the Russian Cyrillic alphabet. Today, Bulgarians celebrate St Cyril and Methodius Day as a national holiday on 24 May (also known as the Day of Bulgarian Culture or the Cyrillic Alphabet Day).

Bulgarian is spoken by about 77% of the population and it is the official language of Bulgaria, with Bulgarian-speaking minorities in Ukraine, Moldova, Romania, Serbia, Hungary, Greece and Turkey. The literary standard is based on the northeastern dialects. The transitional dialects spoken around the borders between Bulgaria, Serbia and Macedonia are very similar and the political issues arising from this linguistic similarity have been sensitive throughout history.