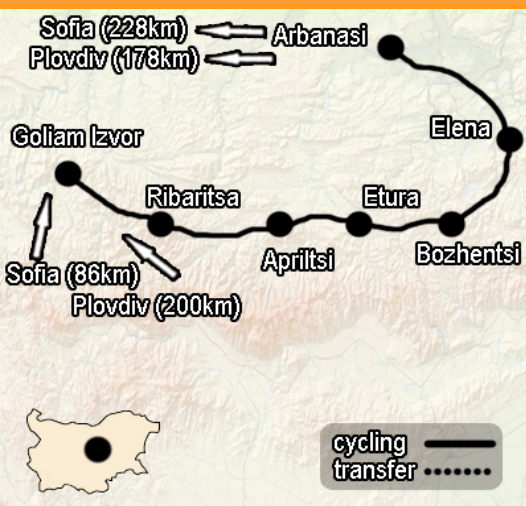


BULGARIA

Balkan Mountains cycling tour



Guaranteed departure dates for 2008: Every Saturday from May to September

Ref. number ZZ-BKBUL01G

(Other dates also possible within the best period if the requirement for min group size is fulfilled)

Introduction:

On this tour we bike along the north and central parts of the Balkan Mountains, famous for their unspoiled nature, green valleys with sheep peacefully grazing on lush grass, precipitous cliffs and gentle, rolling hills offering plenty of unique biking opportunities. We start the trip from the tiny Goliam Izvor village, passing by the Central Balkan National Park and ending up in Veliko Tarnovo – the Old Bulgarian capital and one of the most charming Bulgarian towns. The narrow roads meander through picturesque villages that look as they have been untouched for the past 200 years. You'll see wooden carts pulled by a horse or donkey and villagers making hay the old-fashioned way. During the trip you will visit several of Bulgaria's most important Orthodox monasteries, situated in the dales or woods. Churches with centuries-old icons and colourful murals are spread across a wide range of villages and small towns.

Special highlights:

Glozhene Monastery was built in the 13-th century by the Ukrainian prince Glozh, housing an icon at the age of about 1000 years.

Ribaritsa village is a beautiful mountain resort with numerous little country houses and villas, which according to latest measurement has the biggest concentration of oxygen in the air in Bulgaria.

Troyan Monastery "Assumption of Virgin Mary", being the 3-th largest in Bulgaria, is built in the style of the Bulgarian Renaissance.

Apriltsi is another famous mountain resort which attracts tourists with its

beautiful landscape, numerous active holiday opportunities and plenty of new hotels.

Batoshevo Nunnery was founded in the beginning of the 20-th century with the support of the Russian Tsar.

Etura Open-air Ethnographic Museum - Master craftsmen fashion beautiful gold, silver, copper, leather and wooden articles right before your eyes from early morning until late at the night.

Sokolski Monastery - During Ottoman times the monks offered succour to Bulgarian outlaws and used to provide the local rebels with an assembly point during the Rising of 1876.

Tryavna has preserved its old town square, the only one left in the country, which has been proclaimed as a Monument of Architecture.

Bozhentsi village is an architectural reserve consisting of some 100 houses from The Bulgarian National Revival Period.

Dryanovo Monastery "St Archangel Michael" is situated in the gorge of Dryanovska River where limestone rocks rise high on all sides of the gorge as unapproachable forest walls.

Kilifarevo Monastery "St Birth of Virgin Mary", built between 1348 and 1350, lies in the valley of the Belitsa River.

Elena (300 m a.s.l.) has managed to preserve the greater part of its architectural heritage.

Arbanasi village is famous for its massive houses that resemble minor fortresses on the outside, with high, solid walls and heavy gates and secret hiding-places, but which are spacious and comfortable, richly decorated and furnished on the inside.

Petropavlovski Monastery "St. St. Peter

and Paul" was founded in 10-th century on the site of a Roman fort. **Veliko Turnovo** (210 m a.s.l.), being the former Bulgarian capital, is regally situated along the historical hills of Tsarevets, Trapezitsa and Sveta Gora on the two banks of Yantra River.

Itinerary:

Day 1. Arrive at Sofia or Plovdiv Airport and transfer to the village of Goliam Izvor (about 1 hr from Sofia; or 3 hrs from Plovdiv), where we stay overnight.

/breakfast/

Day 2. Today's cycling starts in Goliam Izvor village (445 m, or 1,459 ft), heading to Yablanitsa town (famous for producing different kinds of "khalva") and then continue to Malak Izvor village (550m, 1804 ft) . From this point a steep road 4 km long leads you to the Glozhene Monastery (870m, 2854 ft) (you can use the supporting vehicle if you don't feel like cycling upwards). Having visited the monastery you go back downhill to Malak Izvor village and continue to Ribaritsa village (505 m, or 1,656 ft) via the town of Teteven. The road is idle, passing through woody hilly areas, varied by meadows and pastures. From the Glozhene village you cycle upstream Beli Vit River. We stay overnight in Ribaritsa village. From the beginning of the stage down to Yablanitsa town and Malak izvor village, and then from Glozhene Monastery to Glozhene village, the traffic is slow; from Glozhene village to Ribaritsa the traffic is a little heavier.

The road condition is fairly good. There are many spots on the Glozhene-Ribaritsa road where you can find a restaurant/café or grocery store.

However, the best place is Teteven.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 70 km (43.5 miles); uphill cycling: 850 m (2,788 ft); downhill cycling: 800 m (2,624 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 3. This morning you face a fairly challenging ascent from Ribaritsa village (630 m, or 2,066 ft) to the highest point of the day – Bogoy pass (1,185 m, or 3,887 ft.) From this pass the road travels all the way down to the town of Troyan. The road passes through the village of Shipkovo (700 m, or 2,296 ft), famous for its mineral water springs and swimming pools. You are welcome to take a break here before heading further on to Troyan and the Troyan Monastery (440 m, or 1,443 ft). A few hundred metres before the monastery, to the right, is the "Oreshaka" pottery and craft exhibition. After visiting the monastery and the exhibition you continue on towards the mountain resort of Apriltsi where you stay overnight. The road weaves among the hills of the Central Fore-Balkan and affords many opportunities for you to witness local life. The traffic should be slow – except in Troyan town and the Troyan Monastery area. The road surface is good, with some exceptions (mostly by Shipkovo). There are several places throughout the stage where you can have something to eat or drink – Shipkovo, Troyan, Troyan Monastery, amongst others.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 74 km (45.9 ft); uphill cycling: 900 m (2,952 ft); downhill cycling: 1,000 m (3,280 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 4. In the morning you start cycling from Apriltsi centre (550 m, or 1,804 ft). The road undulates throughout this stage. After about 24 km (14.9 miles) you will see the Batoshevo Nunnery on the right-hand side of the road – you are welcome to enjoy a picnic in the garden. The Batoshevo Monastery is also close by. It is a 4 km (2.4 mile) steep climb, so making the journey is entirely your choice. The next milestone is the town of Gabrovo. There you will meet the guide who can either take you by car or you can keep cycling to Etura, an open-air ethnographic museum. The road passes through some hilly areas, flat cultivated terrains, along the river bed of Rositsa River and amid lush green mixed forest. We stay overnight in Etura (465 m, or 1,525 ft). Throughout the stage the traffic is very slow. The road condition is good

excepting a few places. We will make a picnic for lunch, as there are no restaurants throughout this stage. There is only one place in the stage where you will find a grocery store – Batoshevo village.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 55 km (34.1 miles); uphill cycling: 750 m (2,460 ft); downhill cycling: 800 m (2,624 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 5. Transferring via the support vehicle, you start cycling some 10 km (6.2 miles) out of Gabrovo in order to avoid the heavy town traffic. The altitude at this point is 680 m (2,230 ft). After an ascent, immediately followed with a descent, you arrive in Tryavna. There you can spend some time on sightseeing and lunch in the centre of this beautiful town. Further undulations will lead you to the final stop of the day – Bozhentsi (750 m, or 2,460 ft). After a short break you can walk along the picturesque streets and old houses. The traffic down to Tryavna may be fairly heavy, but afterwards the road becomes very peaceful, with almost no cars around. The road surface is good with few exceptions at some parts like Tsareva Livada village. There are a couple of places where you will find something to eat or drink – Tryavna and Tsareva Livada.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 52 km (32.3 miles); uphill cycling: 950m (3,116 ft); downhill cycling: 1,000 m (3,280 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 6. Having visited the Dryanovo Monastery by car that morning, you commence cycling from the Yalovo village turn-off (315 m, or 1,033 ft.). Kilifarevo Monastery is very close. We make a short stop here and continue on to the town of Elena (255 m, or 836 ft) which is some 48 km (29.8 miles) from the start and the final destination for today. Most of the road passes through pastures, cultivated fields and shrubland in the form of low-lying hills, typical of this part of the Fore-Balkan. Throughout the stage the traffic is not heavy and the road is in fairly good condition. There are two places on the stage where you will find a restaurant or café – the Kilefarevo Monastery and Iakovtzi village.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 48 km (29.8 miles), uphill cycling: 600 m (1,968 ft); downhill cycling: 700 m (2,296 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 7. From Elena (255 m, or 836 ft) we continue cycling to the last point on the trip – Arbanasi (395 m, or 1,295 ft). The track today is reasonably smooth with long, even terrain, combined with slight undulations. The landscape includes

meadows, pastures, farmland, shrub-covered hills and finally a beautiful plateau over Veliko Tarnovo. A short descent leads to the centre of Arbanasi village, where the cycling for the whole trip ends. There are quite a few things to see here, including 300-year-old houses, monasteries and museums. After this we head off on a sightseeing tour of Veliko Tarnovo, the site of numerous historical events. In the afternoon you will be transferred to Plovdiv for overnight.

During the initial 19 km, or 11.8 miles, the main road may feature fairly heavy traffic, but later on it becomes very quiet. Road conditions are generally good, except for a few spots like the road before Dragizhevo village. There are two places on the stage where you can have source something to eat or drink – Tserova Koria village and Dragizhevo village.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 43 km (26.7 miles); uphill cycling: 600 m (1,968 ft); downhill cycling: 600 m (1,968 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 8. After breakfast you will have transfer to Sofia or Plovdiv Airport for departure (transfer time: 20 min to Plovdiv Airport or 2 hrs to Sofia Airport)

/breakfast/

Accommodation:

We stay in 3-star hotels (days 4,5 and 6) and a guesthouse (day 7) with private facilities and family-run pensions and guesthouses (the rest days) with shared facilities on HB (breakfast & dinner included).

Luggage transportation:

Luggage is taken care of throughout the whole trip. There is a supporting vehicle with a guide, that meets the tourists few times a day to check if everything is OK. It is possible to skip some parts of the stages for the day and to travel the luggage instead.

Tour type: IT + / GT

Difficulty grade: B

Best period: April 15 – September

Weather:

Temperatures expected for this period are between +15 and +30°C. Sometimes noontime could be a little exhausting for cycling on open territories. Rainfalls or short but heavy showers are possible, being a bit prolonged during spring and late autumn.

Equipment and clothing:

Equipped road bikes and saddlebags (upon request) are provided by the company. We don't provide helmets for hygienic reasons. No special equipment needed for this tour (for list with recommended items see "General").

Bicycles:

For our road cycling tours we provide high quality, light and well-gearred "DRAG - Marathon" road bicycles with the following characteristics:

- frame Alu 7
- gear set – 21 gears – Shimano – Altus

- V-brakes – Shimano SIS 40
- front anti-shock - ZOOM quest 160 (some of the bikes don't have anti-shock)
- rims - ZAC 20, Aluminum - Alloy 6061 - T6
- comfy saddle
- pedals - CYCLONE – Precision
- rear lights (some of the bikes have front lights as well)

Group size: Min. 2 persons

The price includes: equipped bike (without helmet!), guide/driver with a

supporting vehicle, map, roadbook, transfer from/to the airport, accommodation and boarding as mentioned above, VAT and all local taxes.

The price does not include: tips, entrance fees, alcohol drinks, cigarettes and other personal expenses.

GENERAL

TOUR TYPES & GRADES

We provide different varieties of tours as regards to their types and difficulty grades! Whether you will choose individual and group tours with a guide or combined tours with a guide for some part of the trip depends on you. We emphasize on using local experienced guides with knowledge of the local language, culture, history, art, etc. The tours are conducted in the English language. Guides in other languages are available upon request.

Tour types

Our tours are divided in different tour types, regardless of being guided or not or if someone travels alone or in a group. We have prepared your vacation so that you can concentrate on new impressions and experiences, awaiting you all the time. Here is a description of the various tours:

IT+: Individual tours with a guide

The same as the Individual tours, with the only difference that there is a local guide provided for some of the days. During the days with a local guide most probably you will be together with other tourists.

GT: Group tours

There is a guide accompanying you throughout the whole trip, meeting you at the airport upon arrival and leaving you at the airport again for departure. We use well-trained and experienced local people with good knowledge of English. The group size is normally 6-12 people, if not specially mentioned.

Difficulty grades

To prepare yourself for the best of your vacation we recommend that you start planning it in an advance. Good physical condition is required. In order to achieve it we advise you to start walking, jogging or cycling everyday. Swimming a couple of times a week is also highly recommended. You do not need much to get yourself in shape. And don't forget that the most important tip for an unforgettable active holiday is to choose a trip which corresponds to your physical condition!

B: Moderate

3,5-5 hours of cycling per day on average over hilly or flat terrain with only several steep parts (climbing max. 12 %) which can be skipped if it's a guided tour with a supporting vehicle. All people used to cycling should be able to make this trip. However 30-50 km cycling per day is recommended for some time before the start of the tour.

Extensions: Yes, Black Sea

This is a unique proposal, which gives you the opportunity to stay in Bulgaria for one week more at the incredibly low price! We can offer a great variety of means of accommodation - from home stays (no meals) to 2, 3 and 4-star hotels (BB or HB) on the Southern Bulgarian Black Sea Coast: - Sunny Beach - a big modern resort with hundreds of hotels, cafes, pubs, casinos, water-sports facilities etc. - Nessebar, Sozopol - small towns (founded by the ancient Greeks) with picturesque Old Quarters and a specific atmosphere.

- Lozenets - a peaceful small village with a beautiful beach. Only 4-5 km from the forests of the Strandzha Mountains where you can go walking, biking or riding horses.

Equipment and clothing:

Recommended items: good quality padded cycling shorts (baggy style); cycling helmet; cycling shoes; fleece headband; fingerless biking gloves; lightweight windproof biking jacket; waterproof trousers; fleece windstopper jacket; sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion and lip balm.

Money and personal expenses

You will need some extra money to cover meals, drinks and extra trips not included in the tour price. Additional money for souvenirs and personal things could also be spent. That is why it is always necessary to have Bulgarian money in cash.

The payments in Bulgaria are usually made in "LEV" (BGN), which is the official currency. The exchange rate with EU and USD is quite changing sometimes, but approximately it is: BGN:EU - 2:1; BGN:USD - 1,7-1. Credit Cards could be used primarily in some supermarkets and restaurants in the biggest cities as well as in the petrol stations. Usually it is marked on their front doors if Credit Cards are accepted. ATMs ("bankomates") are more frequent (again in the biggest towns only!). Traveler's cheques take quite a lot of time to handle and not each bank deals with them (in many cases it takes even few days since their deposition in the bank!) - thus they are not recommended!

Here are some examples of comparative costs in Bulgaria (NB: prices in mid-range restaurants!):

- Coffee – 0,3 Euro
- Tea – 0,3 Euro
- Beer (0,5 l) – 0,5-1 Euro
- Soft drink (0,5 l) - 0,4-0,5 Euro
- Bottle of water (0,5 l) - 0,3-0,4 Euro
- Bottle of mark red wine (0,75 l) - 5-10 Euro
- Three-course lunch - 4-7 Euro
- Lunch pack - 2-3 Euro

Cell phone coverage

Currently the whole territory of Bulgaria is covered with a mobile connection. However the trekking & cycling tours are done in mountainous areas where the signal could be weak or even lacking from time to time. In such a situation you just need to change your location a bit in order to find available network.

Electricity

In Bulgaria two-pin sockets are normal. Voltage is 220 watts. If you come from the U.S. or UK you need to purchase an adapter, which is available only in Bulgarian cities and biggest winter and sea resorts.

Brief about Bulgaria

Territory - 110 912 sq. km.
Population - 7 538 000 (2003) (83,9 % ethnic Bulgarians; 9,4% Turks; 4,7% Roma; rest – smaller minorities Russians, Armenians, Vlachs, Jews, Karakachans etc.)

Religion – 82,6% Orthodox, 12,2% Islam, 0,7% Protestant, 0,5% Catholics, 4,1% Others.

Capital city - Sofia (1 377 531 people in 2006)

Bigest towns - Plovdiv, Varna, Bourgas, Rouse, Stara Zagora, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven

Mountains - 37 (biggest - Balkan Mountain: length - ~ 550 km.; width - ~ 30-60 km.); (highest - Rila Mountain - peak Musala - 2 925 m.a.s.l.)

Boundaries - North - Romania; East - Black Sea (coastline 378 km.); West - Serbia, Macedonia; South - Greece, Turkey;

Distribution of the lands - 0 - 400 m.a.s.l. - 59,8 %; 400 - 1000 m.a.s.l. - 27,6 %; 1000 - 2000 m.a.s.l. - 11,9 %; over 2000 m.a.s.l. - 0,7 %

Protected areas - 3 national parks, 10 nature parks, 55 reserves, 35 managed reserves, over 350 protected areas and 500 natural monuments

Weather

Mean year temperature - + 10,5 °C (Abs. Min. - -38,3 °C ; Abs. Max. - + 45,2 °C)

Mean rainfall per year - 416 - 650 mm. in the lowlands; 650 - 1193 mm. in the highlands

Rainy days per month – May – 7; June – 8; July – 6; August – 3; September – 6; (number may be higher in the mountains)

Mean daily/night temperatures (up to 1000 m a.s.l.) - May – 22/12 °C; June – 26/16 °C; July – 28/17 °C; August – 26/15 °C; September – 23/13 °C;

Altitudinal distribution of annual temperatures in Bulgaria

