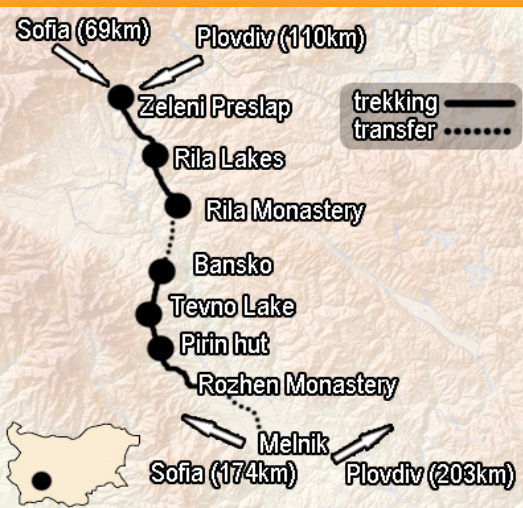


BULGARIA

The Rila-Pirin mountain trek



Guaranteed departure dates for 2008: 05/7, 12/7, 26/7, 02/8, 30/8, 06/9

Ref. number: ZZ-HKBUL01G

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

Introduction:

This trek takes place in the two mountain chains which contain the Balkan Peninsula's highest peaks housing vast national parks, rare vegetation and rich animal life. The trip is structured to take the participants to remote regions with beautiful and unspoiled natural landscapes. If you do not have the time for extensive trekking in the world's biggest mountain ranges, this tour is strongly recommended. Here you can enjoy the physical challenge of alpine landscapes above the tree border, as well as the cultural treasures of Bulgaria and the warm hospitality of the local people.

Special highlights:

Rila Mountains are the highest mountains in Bulgaria and on the whole Balkan Peninsula with Mount Musala - 2925 m a.s.l.

Pirin Mountains are the second highest in Bulgaria after Rila Mountains and the third in the Balkan Peninsula (Mount Vihren 2914 m a.s.l.).

Bansko (925 m a.s.l.) is situated at the northeastern foot of Pirin Mountains beneath the highest and the most beautiful Karst part of the mountains. It is recently one of the biggest ski resorts in Bulgaria.

Melnik (380 m a.s.l.) is the smallest and one of the most fascinating towns-museums in Bulgaria famous for its sandy pyramids and local brand of red wine.

Rila Monastery (1147 m a.s.l.) is the most popular tourist site among all monasteries in Bulgaria equally for its

size, natural surroundings, architecture, wall paintings and ancient history.

Rozhen Monastery is one of the few medieval monasteries, which has preserved its original appearance, authentic architecture and monumental pictorial art.

Itinerary:

Day 1. Arrival at Sofia or Plovdiv airport and transfer to the hotel in the Rila Mountains (1,600 m, or 5,429 ft), where we stay overnight (1,20 hrs from Sofia; 2,30 hrs from Plovdiv). This will be also the starting point for the trek.

/dinner/

Day 2. Our hotel is situated in the Zeleni Preslap region. This day will be dedicated to both high altitude adaptation and the demands of the forthcoming trek. In the morning we will take a leisurely through the spruce forest to the Skakavitsa hut (1,876 m, or 6,154 ft) and the Skakavitsa waterfalls. The path then travels uphill to the Seven Rila Lakes hut (2,100 m, some 6,889 ft) where we will stay overnight. Here we take a stroll around the "blue mountain pearls" of the glacial Rila Lakes. Uphill walk: 900 m (2,952 ft); downhill walk: 200 m (656 ft); walking time: around 4-5 hours

/breakfast, lunchpack, dinner/

Day 3. After breakfast, breathtaking scenery awaits us as we head towards our next target – the revered Rila Monastery (situated at 1,147 m, or 3,763 ft). From the Seven Rila Lakes we head to the area called Razdela (2,600 m, or 8,530 ft). The views from this point are superb, so we will enjoy a short coffee break here and

take in the neighbouring peaks and river gorges. After a 3,5 hour walk along the foothills of the Maliovitsa peak we reach the Rila Monastery. Please note: there are steep and rather long descents to the monastery, which will be hard on the knees. We stay overnight in a hotel by the monastery walls.

Uphill walk: 500 m (1,640 ft); downhill walk: 1,500 (4,921 ft); walking time: 7-8 hours

/breakfast, lunchpack, dinner/

Day 4. A short hike to the hermitage of St. Ivan Rilski (2-3 hrs) and sightseeing of the Rila Monastery are planned till noon. After about 1hr uphill walk through old Beech woods we will reach the hermitage. Then we go back to the monastery for a transfer to Bansko (taking about 1,5 hrs), which will be the starting point for our treks in Pirin Mountains. In Bansko (925 m, or 3,034 ft) we will have lunch followed by a short rest in the hotel. In the afternoon we will make a sightseeing trip in the old quarters of the town – a relaxed program before the most difficult day of the tour.

Uphill walk: 150 m; downhill walk: 150 m; walking time between 2-3 hours

/breakfast, lunch, dinner/

Day 5. This is maybe the hardest day in the program but also quite rewarding for sure. In the morning the bus will deposit us a distance above the town of Bansko, ensuring a better starting point for the day's trek. We begin our walk from the Vihren hut (1,950 m, or 6,397 ft). Close to this structure you will see the marble peak of the giant of the Pirin Mountains – Mount Vihren (2,914 m, or 9,560 ft).

From the hut the path passes by the glacial Bunderishki Lakes and along the highest parts of the Julen Reserve until it reaches the Tevno Lake hut (2,512 m, or 8,241 ft) where we stay overnight. As there is no other alternative along the route we have been forced to use this refuge, where the conditions are rather primitive. Many people prefer to stay in their own sleeping bags although blankets and sheets are provided by the refuge – we also advise you to bring your own sleeping bag (compact summer type). Several peaks over 2,500 m (8,202 ft), lakes and tiny alpine meadows will feature on the trek. Uphill walk: 900 m (2,952 ft); downhill walk: 300 m (984 ft); walking time: 7-8 hours
/breakfast, lunchpack, dinner/

Day 6. Today's walk is a real delight. Our track descends towards the valley of the Zheleznishka River and follows its riverbed all the way on to the Pirin hut (1,640 m, or 5,380 ft), our next overnight stop. Picturesque alpine pastures surround the foothills of the Debeli Ridge, preceded by the Kamenitsa Peak (2,822 m, some 9,258 ft). Uphill walk: 100 m (328 ft); downhill walk: 950 m (3,116 ft); walking time: 4-5 hours
/breakfast, lunchpack, dinner/

Day 7. In the morning we head towards the final stop on the Rila-Pirin trek, the Rozhen village, housing a monastery of the same place some 15min walk after it. The route follows the so-called "Vlashki pat" over the summit of the Sugarevska River, right in to the village of Rozhen. From the

village we have a short transfer through the sandy pyramids of the area (10 min) to the smallest and one of the oldest towns in Bulgaria - Melnik, famous for its local brand of red wine. You will be able to buy some bottles if you wish so. After a short stroll along the main street of the town we will transfer from Melnik to Sofia (3hrs) or Plovdiv (5hrs)(depending on your departure flight) where we stay overnight. Uphill walk: 100 m (328 ft); downhill walk: 1,100 m (4,429 ft); walking time: 5 hours
/breakfast, lunchpack, dinner/

Day 8. Transfer to Sofia or Plovdiv airport for departure.
/dinner/

Accommodation:

We stay overnight in 3-star hotels (days 1, 3 & 4) with rooms with en-suite facilities. Days 2 & 6 we spend in mountain huts with shared facilities (double rooms are available in The Seven Rila Lakes hut, while in Pirin hut we stay in a dorm). Day 5 we stay in mountain refuge (Tevno Lake) in a dorm with rather primitive conditions – there are no bathrooms available and the WC is outside the building (bringing your own compact sleeping bag is advisable). Day 7 we stay in a guesthouse with en-suite facilities. The mealplan is based on fullboard all days (breakfast, lunch pack and dinner included). Lunch is only available during day 4, while for the rest days we have lunchpacks arranged.

Luggage transportation:

Unnecessary luggage will be taken on day 1 (some 15min after arrival at the hotel in the afternoon by the driver), and will be waiting for you at your hotel on day 3. Again you could leave it on day 5 (in the hotel in Bansko before starting the trek to Pirin Mountains) and will receive it again

on day 7 (upon pick up in Melnik; the driver will bring it there).

Tour type: GT

Difficulty grade: B (day 4) / C (days 2, 3, 6 & 7) / D (day 5)

Best period: June – September

Weather:

Temperatures expected for this period are between +10 and +25°C. Temperatures above 2000 m a.s.l. may drop to -5°C after the end of August. Rainfalls or short but heavy showers are possible, being a bit prolonged during spring and late autumn.

Equipment and clothing:

Necessary items: rucksack (60 l); 3-season walking waterproof boots with suitable ankle support; waterproof outer shell garment (breathable if possible!); sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion.

For the full list with recommended items see "General".

Group size: Min 4 persons

The price includes: accommodation, boarding and luggage transfers as mentioned above; transfer to/from Sofia or Plovdiv airport; English-speaking guide and private transfers throughout the tour; VAT and all local taxes.

The price does not include: maps (could be requested in advance when booking the tour), entrance fees, tips, 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:

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

Most of you, who are used to walking during a long weekend, will be in condition to cope with a tour of this level. You should be in good health condition and not too bad physical condition. We have successive days of longer and more difficult walking and days of lighter walking. Some parts of the day routes are done at a higher altitude. The paths are in good condition. We walk for 5-7h a day. You are free to skip some walks and have a rest.

C: Difficult

These tours include trekking which is a little harder, normally on a challenging terrain. We take it for granted that you are in good condition and fit. You should be physically prepared at home to get the maximum of the tour. Most of the trekking is done at a greater height (max 3000 m). As on other tours you are free to skip some treks and have a rest.

D: Challenging

Tours of this level demand that you be really in good shape. The paths are not always in the best condition and the marking can be scarce. There are day-treks with big ascents and descents. Changing weather conditions /even in midsummer/ play an important role when trekking at a very high altitude and may cause changes of the preliminary route. This is to be decided by the mountain guide on the spot. Normally, the treks are 6-8h per day, but some can be longer. Preliminary trekking experience is an advantage, but not necessary if you are really in good shape. Note that during some of the days, you should personally carry your baggage, which is naturally an additional difficulty.

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.
- Sozopol, Nessebar - 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:

You should always remember that you must try to keep the weight of your hiking equipment down to a minimum. Your packed daypack should weigh no more than 10-15 kilograms. Recommended items: waterproof rucksack (60 l) & daypack (35 l); walking waterproof boots with suitable ankle support; light casual shoes/sandals for walking and/or for travelling; gaiters; loose, casual trousers for trekking; waterproof trousers; fleece windstopper jacket; windproof, waterproof outer shell garment (breathable if possible!); hat for sun protection; sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion and lip balm; water bottle; torch (headlamp); mobile phone; underwear (not cotton); mosquito repellent; trekking sticks.

Vaccination:

Tick-borne encephalitis, Marselle fever and Crimea haemorrhagic fever is recommended by some medical sources if travelling in certain areas of Eastern Europe, at specific times of the year. Check latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure.

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 - 1,6-1. 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 - 4-10 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

