

Bulgaria's Mountains and Monasteries

Adventures in Good Company's General Information

International travel takes some planning, but the rewards are well worth it! This information will answer many of your questions, but please don't hesitate to call Adventures in Good Company if we can be of assistance in any way.

Passport: A valid passport is required for travel in Bulgaria. You will need to present it at the airports before and after your flights. A visa is not required. Be sure to carry a photocopy of your passport in a separate location, for security's sake. It is also a good idea to leave one with somebody at home. If you already have a passport, check to make sure it is still current (they expire every 10 years). Passports can be renewed through the mail. If you are getting a passport for the first time, you must submit your application in person. For information on how to obtain a passport, you can download an application at the State Department's website (http://travel.state.gov/passport/passport_1738.html), ask your travel agent, or call the Passport Office at 202-647-0518. Allow at least 6 weeks.

Health: In terms of health, Bulgaria is a very safe place to enjoy on vacation. There are few serious health concerns, and no immunizations are required. Adventures in Good Company and the Department of Health, however, recommend that you are current with your Tetanus vaccination. You do need to have emergency medical evacuation benefits as well.

Language: You can almost always find someone who speaks English in the more populated areas, but in the rural areas where we will be traveling, comprehension of English will be rare. Bulgarian is a South Slavonic language that uses the Cyrillic alphabet. More recently, some words from other languages have been incorporated into the vernacular (for example, you may hear the Italian *ciao* or French *merci*). Bulgarians are very approachable, so if you are not able to delve into the language before our trip, rest assured that a friendly smile will take you a long way in Bulgaria.

Conditioning: You should be in good physical condition and be able to enjoy walking in a hilly environment for three to five hours. If you do not currently exercise regularly, we recommend that you start a conditioning program at least four months before the trip. This should consist of some sort of aerobic exercise 3 to 4 times a week, at a level sufficient to make you breathe deeply but not so vigorous as to make you pant. Walking and hiking, particularly up hills, is excellent exercise. Start with 30 minutes and gradually include some walks up to 2 to 3 hours long. One month before your trip start hiking with your daypack carrying everything you will be bringing. Although for the most part the terrain is gradual, we will have occasional steep ascents and descents. So we recommend conditioning exercises specifically for your knees as well (e.g. squats, lunges). The key is to be consistent and to increase your exercise level gradually. Being in sufficient condition will add greatly to your enjoyment of the trip. We will be glad to provide you with specific conditioning suggestions.

Accommodations and meals: We will be staying in comfortable tourist-class hotels that are classified two to three star by the Bulgarian classification system. These hotels offer twin rooms with private facilities (WC & shower; Please note Bulgarian bathrooms are typically "wet rooms" without shower cubicles, so water from the shower flows over the bathroom floor before draining away). All meals from supper on July 12th to breakfast on July 20th will be provided. Lunch will sometimes be a picnic and sometimes be in a casual restaurant or cafe. Fresh fruit and salads are an important part of the Bulgarian diet.

Mail, Phone & Internet: Because we will be staying in different hotels, it is difficult to receive mail during our trip. Reasonably priced internet cafes are available in Sofia and Borovets. From Bulgaria it's easy to telephone anywhere in the world from public phone booths. Some accept coins, although most now only take phone cards, and some booths also accept Visa and MasterCard for long distance calls (and have instructions in English). Cards can be bought at kiosks and in some shops, ranging in price from 5 to 25 lv. To call to Bulgaria from the US, start with 011, 359 and then omit the first 0 in their number. Bulgaria is on Eastern European Time. When it is noon in Sofia, it's 2am in L.A. and 5am in New York.

Spending Money: The Bulgarian currency is called leva (singular lev), which comprises 100 stotinka and is almost always abbreviated to lv. Credit cards can be used at the airport (there is one ATM in the arrivals hall) and at ATMs dotted around Sofia. ATMs have also recently appeared in some of the smaller towns. The maximum daily withdrawal is 400 leva. Travelers checks are not recommended as they are not easily converted to cash and will not give you a good rate. You will need money for snacks, beverages, guide gratuities, personal excursions, gifts, and other items of a personal nature. The current exchange rate is approximately 1 lev to 0.60 US dollar although rates can always fluctuate. **Note:** although Bulgaria will be entering the European Union in 2007, they will not use the euro for several more years.

Weather: The weather in July is usually stable and very pleasant. In the mountains, the average day time temperatures in July range between about 78 degrees (maximum) and 61 degrees (minimum). There is often a brisk breeze blowing higher up on the peaks and ridges which can make the actual temperature feel colder, and of course, being in high mountains one always has to be prepared for sudden sharp summer storms sometimes with hail. In general, rainfall/precipitation in July is very low, a monthly average between 1 to 2 inches.

Electrical Appliances: Bulgaria runs on 220V, 50Hz AC. Make sure you bring a plug adapter for any electrical items you travel with - plugs have two round pins. Some specialty travel stores carry adapters and can help you choose the right one.

Packing: Traveling light enhances the feeling of freedom on vacation. However, do not forget your *raingear*. You will need a daypack to carry water, raingear and snacks when hiking. There can be pickpockets in crowded markets, and you may want to carry most of your money in a moneybelt or neck wallet when in those settings. Although Bulgaria is generally safe outside of Sofia, we recommend leaving valuables at home.

Getting there: We recommend researching your airfare as soon as possible to get the best rates. Be sure, when scheduling that you are *arriving* in Sofia on July 12nd by afternoon. We will be back in Sofia by mid-morning on July 20 and you can plan to fly out by mid-afternoon. If you are either arriving before the flight or staying on afterwards, we will be glad to assist you in arranging a hotel. Sofia International Airport (SOF) is serviced by many major airlines, and you can book directly through them, or for possibly better rates, book through a travel website (Travelocity, for example). Please feel free to contact us if you need help deciding your flight plans.

Tipping Guidelines

Tipping at the end of the trip is optional. If you feel your guide(s) did an outstanding job and would like to reward him or her for their efforts, a suggested rule of thumb is US \$5-\$10 per person, per day. Oftentimes, trip members organize a group envelope (this makes it anonymous) and present it to the guides at the last shared meal.

Suggested bibliography:

Under the Yoke by Ivan Vazov. This is Bulgaria's most celebrated historical novel, written by the country's most beloved author. It is a tale of the bloody uprising of 1876, when Bulgarian patriots fought to free Bulgaria from 500 years of Ottoman rule. If you read one book before you go, this should be it.

Bulgarian Monasteries: Monuments of History, Culture, and Art By Georgi Ivanov Chavritkov

The Rila Monastery: history, architecture, frescoes, woodcarvings. By Khristo Khadzhihristov

Bulgarian Folk Customs By Marcia MacDermott

Clay and Star: Contemporary Bulgarian Poets
By Lisa Sapinkopf and Georgi Belev (editors)

Some interesting websites:

The official travel site for Bulgaria is well organized with quite a bit of information and photos:
<http://www.bulgariatravel.org/>

This site is a bit flashy, but it has a plethora of concise and easy to understand information:
<http://www.travel-bulgaria.com/>