

## **Bulgaria's Mountains and Monasteries Itinerary**

### **July 12 – 20, 2008**

**July 12:** Arrive Sofia and transfer (2 hours 30 minutes) to the Gornovodenski Monastery. This former medieval monastery is located on the northern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains and has been converted into a simple, but very atmospheric hotel.

**July 13:** We start the day with a drive to the Asenova Fortress, which dates back to the 9th century. The fortress is a part of the Rodopi line fortresses that guarded the northern Byzantine territories from the invasions of the Slavs and was an important protector of the Bachkovo Monastery, the second largest in Bulgaria. As well as looking round the monastery itself, we will also have a gentle walk in the beautiful valley behind it. At the edge of a botanic reserve, we will find several interesting chapels tucked away in the forest. After a picnic lunch we drive on into the heart of the Rhodope Mountains, stopping off at the picturesque village of Shiroka Luka, famous for its traditional architecture. From there we complete our transfer to Yagodina village, a very remote and friendly mountain settlement, which is inhabited by Pomatsi (members of the Bulgarian Muslim minority). Here we will stay in a small family run hotel offering a warm welcome and wonderful home-cooked food. Walking Time = 2 hours; ascent and descent is about 600 ft.

**July 14:** Today we walk from Yagodina village across the Sveti Iliya ridge, admiring wonderful views, before heading down via beautiful meadows into the Trigrad Gorge. This is the site of the so-called "Devil's Throat" cave, an enormous cavern from which Orpheus is said to have emerged from the Underworld. Then from the nearby village of Trigrad, we set off on foot again back to the village of Yagodina following the line of a former Roman road. This whole region is famed for its amazingly rich flora, which includes many endemic species. Walking Time = 5 hours; ascent and descent is about 1200 ft.

**July 15:** From our hotel, we resume on foot long the line of the former Roman road and descend into the Buinovsko Gorge where we will visit the Yagodina Cave. This is one of the most spectacular in the country and has numerous breath-taking stalagmites, stalactites, and other unusual cave formations. We then set off on a long but extremely picturesque drive west through the Rhodope Mountains, stopping off on route to look at an ancient Roman bridge and also the attractive village of Dolen, famed for its traditional vernacular architecture. Finally we spend the night at the small provincial town of Gotse Delchev which is located in the valley of the river Mesta. Walking Time = 1 hour; ascent is 300 ft; descent is 600 ft

**July 16:** We start the day by driving up onto the flank of the Pirin Mountains where we spend the morning in the village of Breznitsa as guests of some local Pomak (Bulgarian Muslim) women. They will demonstrate their rich tradition of weaving and handicraft making and also prepare us a homemade lunch, possibly accompanied by some traditional folk songs. Leaving the village, we drive across the southern Pirin Mountains via the Popovi Livadi pass to arrive in Melnik, the smallest and perhaps most beautiful town in Bulgaria, stunningly set in an amazing sandstone gorge. In the late afternoon, we can climb up onto the Sveti Nikola elevation above town from which there are superb views over the surrounding region. Walking Time = 2 hours; ascent and descent is about 450 ft.

**July 17:** Today is a full day spent exploring the Melnik region on foot. First we make our

way to the village of Kurlanovo, from where we climb up to the remote Chapel of "Sveti Iliya". We then drop down to the village of Rozhen for lunch, before making our way on to the nearby Rozhen Monastery. This monastery, one of the most picturesque and tranquil in Bulgaria and one of the few Bulgarian monasteries from the Middle Ages, has survived relatively intact up to present days. Having looked round the monastery, we then complete our walk back to Melnik by following a spectacular trail through a labyrinth of sandstone pinnacles, ridges and gorges. Walking Time = 4 hours; ascent and descent is about 1350 ft.

**July 18:** Boarding our bus this morning we travel north up the Struma Valley, and then cut back east into the heart of the Rila mountains. Here we will visit the Rila Monastery, breathtakingly situated beneath a backdrop of jagged peaks. We'll start with a visit to the hermitage of St John of Rila and have the opportunity to purify ourselves as we climb out a tunnel from his cave (this is optional). We will then take a short walk in the surrounding "Rila Monastery" Nature Park to the monastery itself. We'll take time to look at the many icons and soak up the atmosphere of the monastery itself. Later in the afternoon, we transfer to the other side of the range and our hotel at Borovets, the Rila's most famous resort. Walking Time = 1 hour; ascent is 260 ft; descent is 590 ft

**July 19:** Climbing Mt. Musala (9600 ft) the highest peak not only in Bulgaria but also on the whole of the Balkan Peninsula. A fitting finale to our holiday. Using a cabin-lift to take us up from Borovets to 7,600 ft, we then set off on foot to climb the peak. The first part of the hike follows a long ridge to the ruins of a former Soviet-era ski project before starting steadily up. From there the ascent is steep and rocky in places, but very rewarding. However, as this is an out and back walk, it is possible for those who don't want to do the whole climb to stop off at a couple of convenient refuges and wait for the rest of the party to return. We will return to Borovets on the same chairlift, making a total hike of 4 to 6 hours. That night we'll visit the traditional home of a Bulgarian "granny" for a celebratory meal, the perfect way to end this magic week. Walking Time = 4-6 hours; ascent and descent is about 1800 ft.

**July 20:** Leaving the Rila Mountains we head north to Sofia. We'll have a short, guided tour and then some free time to enjoy the sights of Bulgaria's capital city, before getting on the plane for home or on to the next adventure