Tour Code
SL4

ADVENTURESABROAD

SLOVAK REPUBLIC, HUNGARY, ROMANIA & BULGARIA

28 days

Created on: 13 Nov, 2026

Day 1 Arrive in Bratislava

Arrive in Bratislava, capital of the Slovak Republic.

Overnight in Bratislava.

Included Meal(s): Dinner

Day 2 Bratislava - Trencin: Castle Tour

Three different countries meet in Bratislava, where languages, traditions, and cultures create a unique microcosm of central Europe. This youthful, dynamic capital pulses with energy while remaining proud of its rich past, where tradition, nostalgia and music weave through cobblestoned streets.
Our morning city tour reveals Bratislava's main treasures: the historic Old Town with its medieval gates and towers, the Gothic Cathedral of St Martin where Hungarian kings were once crowned, and the 14th-century Tower of St Michael standing guard in the ancient city walls.

After lunch, we travel to Trencin in western Slovakia, one of the oldest Slovak cities, chronicled as early as the 11th century. Its strategic location near three Carpathian Mountain passes on the crossroads of ancient commercial routes determined the character of this significant landmark. The famous Amber Road, used by Etruscan, Greek, and later Roman merchants to transport precious amber from the Baltic region, passed directly through Trencin.

The city is dominated by Trencin Castle, Slovakia's third-largest castle complex. With extensive fortifications and several palace buildings surrounding the central medieval tower, it remains the highest point of the city. Below the castle, winding side streets and historic covered stairs lead to a charming small square, while the old town spreads around a large main square anchored by a baroque church.

Overnight in Trencin

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 3 Trencin - Bojnice - Ruzomberok - Horny Smokovec

Our journey leads us through Slovakia's heartland via Bojnice, a charming town at the upper Nitra River that ranks among Slovakia's oldest spa destinations. Here stands the famous Bojnice Castle, a romantic fairy-tale structure that has served as the backdrop for countless films. We explore both the castle's opulent interiors and the picturesque town nestled just below its walls.

We continue through Ruzomberok, situated in the scenic Vah River Valley. Founded by German colonists in 1223, this town became renowned for its guilds, industrial production, and skilled craftsmen who travelled throughout Europe plying their trades.

Our destination is Horny Smokovec, gateway to the High Tatras National Park, founded in 1948 and forming the northernmost section of the Carpathian Mountains. This geographic region shelters numerous glacial lakes and displays a distinctly alpine character, with jagged peaks rising dramatically above pristine forests. The crisp mountain air and stunning vistas create an atmosphere worlds away from the valley towns below.

Overnight in Horny Smokovec

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 4 Pieniny National Park

We venture into Pieniny National Park, the crown jewel among central Europe's most impressive areas of natural beauty. Our exploration begins at the medieval Cerveny Klastor, once a Carthusian monastery whose red-brick walls have witnessed centuries of spiritual contemplation alongside the rushing Dunajec River, which forms a natural border between Slovakia and Poland.

The open-air museum of folk architecture in Stara Lubovna offers a fascinating glimpse into traditional mountain life. Here we walk among a precious collection of wooden houses dating from the late 19th to early 20th century, each structure relocated and carefully preserved to show how mountain families lived and worked in harmony with their challenging environment.

After lunch, we continue to Kezmarok, where we visit the remarkable German-built wooden Lutheran Church, a unique masterpiece of carpentry and artistry. This extraordinary structure, built entirely without metal nails, demonstrates the incredible skill of 17th-century craftsmen who created one of Europe's most unusual religious buildings. The church's interior, carved entirely from wood, creates an atmosphere of warm spirituality unlike any traditional stone church.

Overnight in Horny Smokovec

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 5 Horny Smokovec - Bratislava

A scenic mountain route leads us back to Bratislava, winding through the spectacular ranges of the High Tatras to the Low Tatras. Mountain peaks and hiking trails frame our journey, while still-green forests, bubbling streams, and traditional haystacks shaped like miniature peak-roofed houses dot the landscape. The contrast between Slovakia's alpine heartland and its Danube valley capital creates a perfect showcase of this young nation's geographic diversity.

We arrive in Bratislava by mid-afternoon, with time to rest and reflect on our mountain adventures before dinner. The journey from Slovakia's highest peaks to its historic capital reveals the remarkable variety contained within this compact Central European nation.

Overnight in Bratislava

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 6 Bratislava, Slovak Republic - Budapest, Hungary

The mighty Danube guides our morning journey from Bratislava to Budapest, Hungary's magnificent capital. Hungary reveals itself as a land of beautiful monuments and romantic music, where history resonates through every cobblestone and melody.

Buda and Pest, two of the city's three historic regions, face each other across the Danube, which forms the physical and spiritual centre of the Hungarian capital. This great river serves as the city's centrepiece, its heart, and its pulse, creating an even more intimate relationship than the Seine enjoys with Paris or the Arno with Florence.

Upon arrival, we embark on a walking tour of the city's urban heart, an area filled with stately old buildings, grand avenues, and countless narrow streets that tell Budapest's thousand-year story. We take local transport to the massive neo-Gothic Parliament (Orszaghaz), the most visible building on Budapest's left bank. Built by 1,000 workers between 1885 and 1902, this magnificent structure has become the symbol of the capital with its slender towers, spacious arcades, high windows and vast central dome.

Our route continues past the Museum of Ethnography to the stately Liberty Square (Szabadsag ter), then to Roosevelt Square and the famous Chain Bridge, the oldest and most beautiful of seven road bridges spanning the Danube in Budapest. Before its construction, the river could only be crossed by ferry or by a pontoon bridge that had to be removed when ice blocks floated downstream in winter.

Overnight in Budapest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 7 Budapest: City Tour

* Logistical note * Travellers starting their journey here in Budapest, along with those arriving from Bratislava on a longer tour option, will enjoy the following touring today:

Heroes' Square provides our dramatic starting point, where we learn about Hungary's complex thousand-year history at the imposing Vajdahunyad Castle. This eclectic structure showcases different periods of Hungarian architecture, from Romanesque to Gothic to Renaissance styles.

We then cross Margaret Bridge to Buda's hilly side, where the Citadel offers panoramic views of the entire city spread along both banks of the Danube. The vista reveals Budapest's unique geographic setting, where rolling hills meet the great plain, and architectural treasures from every era create one of Europe's most beautiful urban landscapes.

Castle Hill becomes our main focus, where we spend the remainder of the day exploring St. Matthias Church with its distinctive diamond-patterned roof and the fairytale Fisherman's Bastion with its seven towers representing the seven Magyar tribes that settled in the Carpathian Basin. These neo-Gothic and neo-Romanesque structures, though relatively recent, perfectly capture the romantic spirit of Hungarian history.

Overnight in Budapest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 8 Budapest: At Leisure

Budapest invites personal discovery as you explore this captivating city at your own pace. Perhaps return to the elegant promenade along the Danube, where artists display their work and musicians fill the air with traditional melodies. The city's numerous museums offer deeper insights into Hungarian culture, from folk traditions to fine arts to the complex history of this resilient nation.

The coffeehouse tradition beckons – at the turn of the 20th century, Budapest boasted over 400 coffeehouses, many patronised by struggling writers who made these elegant spaces the cornerstone of the city's literary life. Today's surviving coffeehouses maintain this cultural heritage, offering the perfect setting for cake and conversation while watching Budapest's daily rhythm unfold beyond tall windows.

Alternative explorations might include the Great Market Hall, where local vendors sell everything from paprika to handcrafted items, or a stroll through the Pest side's pedestrian areas, where international brands mix with local boutiques in a vibrant commercial district.

Overnight in Budapest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 9 Budapest - Szentendre - Holloko - Eger

The romantic Danube Bend leads us to Szentendre, a riverside town celebrated for its museums, galleries and artists. Once called Ulcisia Castra (Wolf Castle) by the Romans, today Szentendre charms visitors with its south European atmosphere, baroque architecture, churches of various faiths, narrow side streets, and cobblestone roads. Our walking tour reveals why this picturesque town has attracted artists for generations.

We then visit the UNESCO-protected village of Holloko, where approximately 650 people maintain one of Europe's best-preserved traditional settlements. The 'Old Village' contains 50 houses listed as historic monuments, their white-painted walls and red-tile roofs creating a harmonious ensemble unchanged for centuries. Throughout time, Holloko has preserved its unique ethnographic and folk art values, while atop the nearby hill, the remains of a 13th-century castle remind us of medieval Hungary's turbulent frontier history.

Our journey continues to Eger, nestled in the valley between the Bukk and Matra Hills. This historic city gained fame for three things: Egri Bikaver (Bull's Blood) wine, its magnificent medieval library, and possessing Europe's northernmost minaret – a reminder of 150 years of Turkish occupation. The narrow streets, arcaded buildings, wrought-iron gates, and baroque towers create perfect walking opportunities, while the peaks of Hungary's highest mountains provide a dramatic natural backdrop.

Overnight in Eger

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 10 Eger: Town Tour

Eger's story stretches back to the Stone Age, but the town achieved its greatest glory during the 1552 Siege of Eger, when Hungarian forces successfully defended against overwhelming Ottoman odds. During the early Middle Ages, German, Avar and Slavonic tribes inhabited the area before Hungarian settlement in the 10th century brought prosperity that peaked during the 14th-16th centuries, when winegrowing became the economic foundation for which Eger remains famous today.

Our walking tour includes the impressive Eger Castle with its museum and underground casements, where we learn about the legendary defence that inspired generations of Hungarians. The fortress walls and towers tell stories of courage and determination that echo through Hungarian national consciousness.

We also visit the Archbishop's Palace, a baroque masterpiece that reflects the Counter-Reformation's influence in Hungary, and the Franciscan Church, whose elegant interior showcases religious art from several centuries. The Turkish Minaret, a 40-metre cylindrical tower, stands as one of Hungary's most unusual monuments – the northernmost minaret in Europe and one of the few surviving architectural reminders of Ottoman rule in Central Europe.

Overnight in Eger

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 11 Eger - Paks - Siklos - Pecs

Southern Transdanubia welcomes us with its landscape of undulating hills, forest-clad ridges and rural ambience as we depart Eger for Hungary's southwestern region. Our route leads us past Budapest and south along the Danube River, through countryside where small villages and agricultural lands create a pastoral symphony of green fields and traditional farmsteads.

After passing Paks, situated on the banks of the Danube River, we continue toward Pecs, a city selected as European Capital of Culture in 2010, sharing the title with Essen and Istanbul. This distinction reflects Pecs' role as a major art centre and university town, where intellectual and cultural life has flourished for over a thousand years.

Our walking tour of the Old Town reveals layers of history: the historic cathedral with its distinctive four towers, the synagogue representing the once-thriving Jewish community, ancient mosques from the Ottoman period, and the fourth-century Christian necropolis – a UNESCO World Heritage Site featuring burial chambers decorated with remarkable early Christian murals that represent some of Europe's finest examples of late Roman and early Christian art.

Overnight in Pecs

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 12 Pecs - Villany - Pecs

The historic town of Siklos and its remarkably well-preserved medieval castle anchor our morning exploration near Hungary's southern border. Wine production began here when Romans settled at a place they called Seres, and archaeological finds prove that viticulture has thrived in this region for over two millennia.

After exploring Siklos Castle's towers, walls, and courtyards, we embark on an afternoon journey along the famous Villany-Siklos Wine Road, a 30-kilometre route covering eight villages where vineyards cascade down south-facing slopes in perfect conditions for winemaking. The Romans first recognised this area's potential, and finds uncovered at the base of the hills confirm over 2,000 years of continuous grape cultivation.

Today the Villany-Siklos wine region encompasses approximately 2,000 hectares, where Mediterranean-style red wines thrive in a climate

warmer than most of Hungary. Local winemakers specialise in full-bodied reds that have gained international recognition, particularly Cabernet Sauvignon, Merlot, and the indigenous Kadarka variety. We sample these distinctive wines while learning about traditional and modern winemaking techniques from local vintners.

Overnight in Pecs

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 13 Pecs - Lake Balaton Region - Budapest

Lake Balaton, affectionately called the "Hungarian Sea," spreads before us as we journey north to Central Europe's largest lake. This massive freshwater lake, stretching 77 kilometres in length, has served as Hungary's premier holiday destination for generations of families seeking respite from urban life.

Our exploration focuses on the Tihany Peninsula, declared a national park in 1952 and renowned for its historical monuments, beautiful panoramas, and Mediterranean-like climate created by the lake's moderating influence. We cross the lake by ferry from Szantod to Tihany, enjoying views across the water toward distant hills where vineyards and resort towns dot the shoreline.

At Tihany, we visit the Benedictine Abbey Church, built in 1754 on the site of King Andrew I's original 11th-century church. This twin-spired, ochre-coloured baroque masterpiece dominates the peninsula's skyline. Inside, we admire the fantastic altars, pulpits and screens carved between 1753 and 1779 by Austrian lay brother Sebastian Stuhlhof – each a baroque-rococo masterpiece. King Andrew I's remains rest in a limestone sarcophagus in the atmospheric Romanesque crypt.

We also visit Balatonfured, a charming town on the lake's northern shore that played an important role in 18th-century social life. Here the first Balaton steamship began its journeys, and the first yachtsmen's association established its headquarters. For three centuries, patients have been treated with mineral water springs beneficial for diabetes and digestive ailments.

Overnight in Budapest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 14 Budapest, Hungary - Bucharest, Romania

Romanian legend tells us that Bucharest was founded on the banks of the Dambovita River by a shepherd named Bucur, whose name literally means "joy." His enchanting flute playing reportedly dazzled the people, while his hearty wine from nearby vineyards endeared him to local traders, who gave his name to their settlement.

This morning we fly to Romania's largest city and capital, once known for its wide, tree-lined boulevards, glorious Belle Epoque buildings and reputation for high living that earned it the nickname "Little Paris" in the early 1900s. Today Bucharest pulses as a bustling metropolis where medieval streets meet communist-era boulevards and modern European districts.

After settling into our accommodations, we embark on an informal walking orientation of the city centre, where layers of history create a fascinating urban palimpsest. Romanian, Ottoman, Austrian, French, and Soviet influences blend in architecture, cuisine, and cultural traditions, while the vibrant energy of contemporary Romania emerges in cafes, galleries, and public spaces throughout the historic centre.

Overnight in Bucharest

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 15 Bucharest: City Tour - Fly to Suceava - Gura Humorului

This morning belongs to Bucharest itself. We begin at the Arc de Triomphe on Soseaua Kiseleff, a boulevard longer than the Champs-Elysees and built to give a young nation, recently free of Ottoman suzerainty, a European face. From there we tour Cotroceni Palace, still an official presidential residence, and pass the Romanian Athenaeum and University Square, scene of the 1989 revolution.

The Cathedral of National Salvation is Orthodox Christianity announced at cathedral scale. Consecrated only a few years ago beside the Palace of Parliament, it stands as a deliberate counterweight — faith reasserting itself in the shadow of the regime that once tried to erase it. The National History Museum rounds out the morning with the story of everything in between: Roman Dacia, medieval principalities, and a century of juggling larger neighbours.

In the afternoon we visit the Bucharest Village Museum, one of Europe's oldest open-air museums, where wooden churches, watermills, and farmhouses gathered from across the country preserve a rural life that outlasted every regime layered on top of it.

PLEASE NOTE: We always attempt to include the Palace of Parliament, but the building frequently closes to visitors for official functions, often without notice.

An early dinner precedes our flight north to Suceava, gateway to Bucovina.

Overnight in Gura Humorului.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 16 Bucovina: Painted Monasteries & Cacica Salt Mine

We begin at the Museum of Bucovinian Traditions in Gura Humorului, a fitting introduction to a region where Orthodox faith and folk art have always been intertwined. From here we trace the deepest historical layer of this crossroads — not empires competing for Romania, but a Moldavian civilisation confident enough, in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, to paint its faith on the outside of its churches for everyone to see.

At Voronet, frescoes in a blue so distinctive it carries the monastery's name cover the exterior walls floor to roofline — a nuns' monastery consecrated to St. George, built once Stephen the Great had centralised the Moldavian state and given it the confidence for this kind of statement. Sucevita, the largest and best-preserved of the painted monasteries, goes further still: an almost complete fresco cycle wraps its fortified enclosure, built in 1586, inside and out — UNESCO-protected, and rightly compared to the mural tradition of Venice's San Marco.

We break from monasteries for the Cacica Salt Mine, worked since the eighteenth century, where a small chapel carved entirely from salt sits deep beneath the surface alongside the old mining galleries.

Leaving the painted monasteries behind, we drive south to Piatra Neamt, a small city framed by the Eastern Carpathians and our base for tomorrow's mountain crossing.

Overnight in Piatra Neamt.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 17 Piatra Neamt - Bicaz Gorges & Lacu Rosu - Sighisoara

This morning's drive is one of Romania's most dramatic, through the Bicaz Gorges, where the road narrows and climbs for 5 km/3.1 mi beneath limestone walls rising 300 m/985 ft overhead — a stretch so tight in places it's known locally as the 'neck of hell.' Protected within Hasmas-Bicaz Gorges National Park, the gorge marks our crossing from Moldavia into Transylvania.

A few kilometres on, we reach Lacu Rosu, or Red Lake, formed in 1837 when an earthquake-triggered landslide dammed the Bicaz River. We stop here for lunch, the reddish sediment that names the lake visible along its shoreline against a backdrop of alpine peaks.

We continue west into Transylvania proper, arriving by evening in Sighisoara.

Overnight in Sighisoara.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 18 Sighisoara - Viscri - Brasov

Sighisoara is the only inhabited medieval citadel in Europe, and this morning we explore it on foot: cobbled lanes climbing past craft-guild towers — tinsmiths, furriers, butchers — to the fourteenth-century Clock Tower, where the History Museum occupies the former Town Hall and the view stretches across Saxon rooftops unchanged in centuries. This is Transylvania's other layer of empire: German-speaking colonists, invited here by Hungarian kings eight centuries ago to farm and defend the frontier, who built towns strong enough to still be standing.

We continue to Viscri, a Saxon village so well preserved that King Charles III bought a house here decades before his coronation, drawn by the same fortified church and slow rural rhythm that first attracted Saxon settlers. Storks nest on chimney pots above houses painted in the region's traditional ochre and blue.

By late afternoon we reach Brasov, Romania's second city, tucked between two mountains in a bowl the Saxons chose for the same defensible logic as Sighisoara. We tour the Black Church, the largest Gothic structure in southeastern Europe, blackened — as the name suggests — by a seventeenth-century fire it never fully shed.

Overnight in Brasov

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 19 Brasov: Bran Castle & Sinaia

A short drive from Brasov brings us to Bran Castle, perched on its rocky outcrop exactly where the Saxons built it in 1377 to guard the mountain pass into Wallachia. Its association with Dracula is a twentieth-century invention, but the real history needs no embellishment: a customs post and frontier fortress whose rooms and towers, linked by passages cut into the rock, controlled trade between Transylvania and the lands beyond the mountains.

From medieval frontier we jump four centuries forward, to Sinaia and Peles Castle — Romania's answer to the question of what a newly independent nation does with a German prince for a king. Built in the 1870s and 80s for Carol I, first of the Hohenzollern monarchs imported to rule a country freshly out from under Ottoman suzerainty, Peles is German Renaissance fantasy transplanted to the Carpathians: 160 rooms, decorated throughout by Carol's eccentric wife Carmen Sylva. The same confidence that filled Bucharest's boulevards at the start of our journey reaches its fullest expression here — a Western European court built, quite literally, onto a Romanian mountainside.

We also visit Pelisor, the smaller Art Nouveau residence built for Carol's successor, and climb to Sinaia Monastery, the seventeenth-century cluster of churches that gave the resort town its name.

We return to Brasov for a second night, with the evening free to explore the old town at leisure.

Overnight in Brasov

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 20 Brasov - Bucharest

We leave Brasov and Transylvania behind, retracing our path toward Bucharest and the close of a week spent among Saxon fortresses, Orthodox frescoes, and a royal family that was never quite Romanian — three different answers to the same question of how a small country survives at the edge of larger ones.

Optional: time and interest permitting, we stop en route in Targoviste, medieval capital of Wallachia and seat of the Princely Court where Vlad the Impaler took his throne in 1456 — a ruler whose reputation, like Bran Castle's borrowed vampire legend, has grown stranger over time than the facts ever were.

Overnight in Bucharest.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 21 Bucharest, Romania - Fly to Sofia, Bulgaria

Sofia, Bulgaria's capital, largely presents itself as a city of wide boulevards and squares, pleasant parks, and enormous Socialist Realism-style buildings. In the 5th century BC, Sofia was the Thracian city of Serdika, and when Romans conquered Thrace, they made it their capital. Attila the Hun's hordes set it ablaze in the 5th century AD, after which Justinian rebuilt it as an important Byzantine stronghold.

NOTE: The timing of today's flight will determine whether we have free time in Bucharest or Sofia.

Upon arrival in Sofia, we settle into our accommodations and begin our introduction to this ancient city where Thracian, Roman, Byzantine, Ottoman, and modern Bulgarian influences create a fascinating cultural mosaic. The wide boulevards reflect 19th-century urban planning, while archaeological sites scattered throughout the city centre reveal layers of two millennia of continuous habitation.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 22 Sofia & Rila Monastery

We journey 121 kilometres south of Sofia through high rock walls with formations like giant animals waiting to pounce, arriving at the 10th-century Rila Monastery nestled in soft, green woods. Mountains rise all around this most-revered of Bulgarian monasteries, while below, the Rilska River races over a stony bed through pristine wilderness.

In the 9th century, twenty-year-old Ivan Rilski (John of Rila) fled to this peaceful place seeking escape from worldly corruption. Finding a cave in the woods above the present monastery site, he embraced the hermit life, feeding animals and birds while praying in the stillness. Like-minded men eventually joined him, building the first monastery about 2.4 kilometres from the present site, where today you can visit his tomb, the little Church of St. Luke, and the cave he inhabited.

Rila Monastery ranks among Europe's largest monasteries, located in some of Bulgaria's most beautiful terrain. Our exploration features the unsurpassed frescoes of the Church of the Blessed Virgin, where monks still practice within this five-domed treasure. The exquisite fortress-like walls also contain the Historical Museum, featuring objects connected with the monastery's thousand-year history, including precious manuscripts, woodcarvings, and ecclesiastical treasures.

After lunch, we return to Sofia for a visit to the National Museum of History, providing an excellent introduction to Bulgarian culture, from ancient Thracian gold treasures to medieval manuscripts to folk traditions that survive today.

Overnight in Sofia.

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 23 Sofia - Plovdiv

We travel to ancient Plovdiv, situated in the Plain of Thrace, where history unfolds in layers across three dramatic hills. Plovdiv was formerly known as Pulpudeva until Philip II of Macedon's weary horse collapsed beneath him at the edge of the Thracian plain in 342 BC. Taking this as an omen, he built Philippolis on the site in his horse's honour. Later Romans renamed it Trimontium – the City on Three Hills – while five centuries of Turkish rule (when it was known as Philibe) brought significant changes to its character.

Today Plovdiv charms visitors with its lovely "stariyat grad" (old town), displaying Turkish influences alongside a distinctive Bulgarian character. Our tour explores the Old Quarter, the Ethnographical Museum housed in a beautifully preserved 19th-century mansion, and the remarkably well-preserved Roman Amphitheatre, still used for performances during summer festivals.

Within Trimontium, the historic heart of Plovdiv, typical 19th-century Bulgarian homes line cobblestoned streets, their overhanging upper floors and painted facades creating one of the Balkans' most photogenic neighbourhoods. The revival-period architecture reflects the prosperity of 19th-century Bulgarian merchants who traded throughout the Ottoman Empire while maintaining their cultural identity.

Overnight in Plovdiv

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 24 Plovdiv - Valley of the Roses - Veliko Tarnovo

The world-famous Valley of the Roses unfolds before us, where 70 percent of the world's "attar" (rose extract) is produced in fields that transform into a pink carpet during May and June harvest season. Nimble-fingered women and girls do most of the picking in the early morning hours, while donkeys carry the precious petals to distilleries where the ancient art of rose oil production continues unchanged for centuries.

In Kazanlak, we visit the Thracian Tomb (4th-3rd centuries BC), a UNESCO World Heritage site representing the original Bulgarians' sophisticated burial customs. The Thracians, closely linked with ancient Greeks, created this underground chamber decorated with remarkable frescoes that survive as masterpieces of ancient art.

Before crossing the spectacular Shipka Pass with its majestic vistas and momentous history, we visit the Shipka Memorial Church, where golden domes rise from the hillside in Russian style, commemorating Bulgarian and Russian soldiers who died fighting for Bulgarian independence. The open-air Ethnographical Museum of Etura recreates a typical 19th-century village, where traditional crafts and rural life continue in authentic workshops and homes.

We arrive in Veliko Tarnovo, once Bulgaria's capital (1185-1396) and still displaying remains of its past glory through fortress walls and palaces perched among steep cliffs of the Yantra Gorge. This capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom rises on three main hills: fortified Tsarevets; Trapezitsa, where boyars lived; and Sveta Gora, once a scholarly monastery centre, now a university site.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 25 Veliko Tarnovo: Town Tour

We explore this town laced with history through our tour of the commanding Tsarevets Citadel (Castle of the Czar), first fortified in the 6th century and evolved into the royal centre of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom by the 12th century's end. The breathtaking views from this picturesque region reveal why medieval Bulgarian rulers chose this dramatic setting for their capital.

A short drive brings us to the hilltop village of Arbanassi, first settled by Albanian immigrants in the 15th century. Here we visit several houses dating from the 16th and 17th centuries, their thick stone walls and hidden courtyards reflecting the uncertain times when wealthy merchants needed to protect their families and fortunes from bandits and tax collectors.

These remarkable houses demonstrate how Bulgarian Christians maintained their prosperity and culture during Ottoman rule, creating architectural gems that blend Bulgarian, Byzantine, and Ottoman influences. The Church of the Nativity contains some of Bulgaria's finest religious frescoes, painted when the village served as a summer retreat for wealthy Bulgarians.

The afternoon offers leisure time to absorb the medieval atmosphere of Veliko Tarnovo, perhaps exploring artisan shops or enjoying coffee while watching the Yantra River wind through the dramatic gorge below the ancient fortress.

Overnight in Veliko Tarnovo

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 26 Veliko Turnovo - Sofia

The beautiful Danube Plain provides our scenic route back to Sofia as we cross the Troyan Pass and visit the nearby Troyan Monastery, Bulgaria's third largest. This spiritual centre, founded in the 17th century, houses remarkable frescoes and wood carvings that represent the pinnacle of Bulgarian religious art during the National Revival period.

After lunch, we continue to the well-preserved "museum-town" of Koprivshtitsa, where the revolt against Ottoman occupation began in 1876. This historic town preserves an invaluable collection of 19th-century Bulgarian architecture, when wealthy merchants built elaborate houses that celebrated Bulgarian identity through distinctive design and decoration.

Our walk through this enchanting town reveals unique houses with wooden columns, painted facades, richly decorated interiors, and lovely gardens that create a living museum of Bulgarian Renaissance culture. Each house tells stories of the families who lived here during Bulgaria's struggle for independence, when education, culture, and commerce flourished despite political oppression.

The architectural ensemble of Koprivshtitsa demonstrates how Bulgarians expressed their national awakening through art, literature, and architecture, creating a distinctive style that blended traditional Bulgarian elements with cosmopolitan influences from across Europe.

Overnight in Sofia

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 27 Sofia: City Sightseeing

Sofia's motto proclaims "Sofia Grows but Never Ages," reflecting a city founded over 7,000 years ago that today serves as an exciting meeting place of history and modernity. Traces of Thracian and Roman lives, Proto-Bulgarian and Slavic cultures create layers visible throughout the contemporary city, while more than 250 historic, archaeological and architectural monuments preserve Sofia's role as the centre of Bulgarian political and cultural life.

Our walking tour reveals Sofia's most famous landmarks, beginning with the magnificent St. Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, one of the city's most spectacular buildings. Beyond the splendour of the building itself, the cathedral houses remarkable icons and murals painted by the era's foremost artists, while its crypt contains Bulgaria's most valuable collection of medieval icons spanning centuries of religious art.

St. Sofia's Church, the second oldest but most significant building in the city, gave Sofia its name and stands as a remarkable archaeological monument witnessing Serdica's golden age during the 6th century. The large archaeological complex of Roman and medieval ruins, dominated by St. George Rotunda, preserves Sofia's oldest building. Repeatedly destroyed and rebuilt, the 5th-century St. George Rotunda has been restored to its original appearance as a Christian church, its circular walls containing frescoes from multiple historical periods.

The remainder of the afternoon invites independent exploration of this fascinating capital, where ancient ruins neighbour contemporary galleries, traditional restaurants serve dishes perfected over centuries, and modern Sofia continues its eternal dance between past and future.

Overnight in Sofia

Included Meal(s): Breakfast and Dinner

Day 28 Departure

Departure from Sofia.

As we bid farewell to our fellow travellers and this land of endless discoveries, we carry with us memories of spectacular landscapes, architectural treasures, and the warm hospitality of peoples whose cultures have endured and flourished despite centuries of challenge and change.

PRIJATNO PATUVANE!! (Pleasant Journey in Bulgarian!)

Included Meal(s): Breakfast