



Rila Monastery

Bulgaria: Culture, History and Traditions

8 - 16 May 2010



Jon Baines
tours



Lake in the Pirin Mountains

Visit a Europe that has all but vanished. Beautiful Bulgaria has a traditional rural heart containing unspoilt landscapes, medieval cities and exquisite towns, magnificent rose harvests and the best preserved Thracian tombs in Europe. Tour leader Su Hagan lives and works in Bulgaria and can give rare insight into the country, its traditions, culture and way of life. On this tour, you will meet her local friends - traditional artisans and craftspeople, as well as everyday villagers - living a way of life that has remained unchanged for centuries.

Arrive in Sofia and head onto the medieval city of Veliko Turnovo, where traditional red tiled houses cascade down a steep incline almost to the edge of the Yantra River. Transfer to your hotel in the nearby village of Arbanasi, and visit the hilltop fortress of Tsvarets Castle and the Patriarch's Church with its breathtaking frescos and icons. Later, you have time to wander in Veliko's old quarter at your leisure.

The villages around Veliko Turnovo offer a wonderful glimpse into a traditional rural way of life. Explore two local villages, Merdanya and Hotnitsa, where Su lives in her eco-house and works as a therapist. In Merdanya, visit the loftily situated monastery which offers fantastic views of the surrounding countryside and the local pottery. Drive to Hotnitsa and visit the waterfall and examine traditional, sustainable house building. Visit the village museum and see singing

dancing performed by local Babas.

Cross the mountains via the Shipka Pass and visit the church of St Nikolai, heading onto the village of Kalofer in the beautiful Valley of the Roses. Here you will see the breathtaking Thracian tombs of Kazanlak, the oldest in Europe and a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Stay overnight in Cucovata House, a traditional village home in Kalofer.

The fragrant Valley of the Roses is responsible for most of the world's rose oil production. The village of Tarnichene hosts an active rose distillery, the Enio Bonchev Distillery, where you will learn first-hand about the painstaking process still used for harvesting and producing this precious substance.



Frescoes inside Rila Monastery



Veliko Turnovo (top) Traditional Bulgarian village (above)

Pay a visit to the traditional laundry and over lunch, hear storytelling with the Master Sculptor Hristo Yotov. Examine traditional village life with a visit to the Women's monastery, the medieval laundry, the 200 year old mill and the Church of the Archangel Mikhail. In the evening, have dinner at Cucovata house with Bulgarian wine tasting.

Spend a day exploring Plovdiv, one of Europe's oldest and most enthralling cities, which has a history stretching back even further than Rome or Constantinople, its layers of history encompassing Thracian fortifications to Ottoman mosques. Visit the Roman amphitheatre and the town museum and take part in a private walking tour of the ancient Greek town centre.

Join local guide Nikolai for a hike along an eco-path, examining local flowers and herbs on the way with a picnic lunch en route. This specialist walk received the Conde Nast Traveller Award for best eco-destination in the world in 2005, and is a highlight of our visit to this beautiful area.

Next day, head into the spectacular Rila Mountains to visit the Rila Monastery, nestled deep in dense woods. Built like a fortress and covered with resplendent frescoes, it was an important religious and cultural centre in the 12th-14th centuries. Spend the night at the monastery and enjoy a Farewell Dinner with the group.

Drive to Sofia, Bulgaria's grand but faded capital, and depart for the UK later in the afternoon.

- 8 May (Sat) London / Sofia / Arbanasi**
Am Arrive Sofia and transfer to Arbanasi
Pm Arrive and transfer to the hotel
Eve Welcome Dinner
- 9 May (Sun) Arbanasi**
Am Full day sightseeing Veliko Turnovo and Arbanasi
 Guided tour of the church in Arbanasi, visit Tsvarets Castle and the Patriarch's Church
Pm Walk through the old town at leisure
- 10 May (Mon) Arbanasi**
Am Drive to Merdanya village and visit the Monastery and Pottery
Pm Drive to Hotnitsa and visit the waterfall and examine traditional, sustainable house building. Visit the village museum and see the local Babas perform. Return to Arbanasi.
- 11 May (Tues) Arbanasi / Kalofer**
Am Cross the Shipka Pass and visit the Church of St Nikolai. Visit the newly opened Thracian Tombs of Golamo Kozmatka
Pm Arrive in the village of Kalofer
- 12 May (Wed) Kalofer**
Am Visit Tarnichene village. Visit the Enio Bonchev Rose Distillery and learn about rose oil production
Pm Visit the house of author and sculptor Hristo. Visit the women's monastery, the medieval laundry, the 200 year old mill, and the Church of the Archangel Mikhail
- 13 May (Thurs) Kalofer**
Am Drive to Plovdiv and visit the Roman Amphitheatre, town museum and take a walking tour of the old Greek town centre
Pm At leisure in Plovdiv. Return to Kalofer
- 14 May (Fri) Kalofer Village**
Am Walk on the eco-path with local guide Nikolay Tsutsov examining local herbs and flowers
Pm Picnic lunch on the trail.
- 15 May (Sat) Kalofer Village / Rila**
Am Drive into the mountains
Pm Visit the Rila Monastery
Eve Overnight at Rila Monastery and Farewell Dinner
- 16 May (Sun) Rila/ Sofia / London**
Am Drive to Sofia and fly to the UK

Tour Leader

Su Hagan lives in Central Bulgaria, where she is building her own house using traditional methods using clay, mud, straw and sand. An experienced tour leader, she leads regular tours to Nepal, India and Bulgaria, and was instrumental in creating this tour. She has many friends and connections within the local communities of Bulgaria and her involvement in this tour ensures that we have unparalleled access to the traditional culture and way of life. Su has been for many years a practising Aromatherapist, Ayurvedic and Bowen Practitioner and teacher and brings great experience and insight into the visit to the Valley of the Roses and rose oil production and uses.

Local Guide

Nikolay Tsutsov and his family own the beautiful traditional Cucovata House in the village of Kalofer in the Valley of the Roses, where the group stay during the tour. The family tend roses and grape vines while Nikolay and his wife act as attentive host and hostess, offering traditional home cooked cuisine. Nikolay first trained as a ballet dancer and then studied political science at Sofia University, before working in tourism. He has excellent knowledge of the local area and its traditions.



Thracian frescoes



Cucovata House

The cost of the tour is £1,280.00

The cost includes:

- Return flights on the scheduled services of British Airways from London to Sofia
- All airport taxes
- Comprehensive briefing notes
- The services of a tour leader (Su Hagan)

In Bulgaria the cost includes:

- 8 nights accommodation in twin or double bedded accommodation with private facilities (except at the Rila Monastery see below) in a boutique hotel, village house and monastery

The single room supplement is £165.00

- Breakfast daily
- Picnic lunch on day 7 and dinners on days 1, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8
- A full programme of visits and talks as per the itinerary
- Admission fees where applicable
- Full-time National Guide
- All transport

The cost excludes:

- Meals not mentioned
- All personal extras such as tips, portage, laundry, inoculation fees and drinks
- All optional excursions, tours and visits
- Travel insurance

Please note, all itineraries are subject to change according to local conditions. Due to the nature of the tour places are limited.

To book a place on this tour please request a booking form.

Hotels

You will stay in a National Revival style hotel in Arbanasi, a family run traditional village house in Kalofer and the Rila Monastery, which has simple 3-4 bedded rooms. In the monastery, couples and singles may pay a small single supplement, or you may stay in a nearby hotel instead if you prefer.

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