

Bulgaria БЪЛГАРИЯ

HIGHLIGHTS

- **Veliko Tŕnovo** Laid-back student town boasting hiking, biking, rock climbing and a sprawling citadel along a gorge that hosts a night light show (p237)
- **Varna** It'd be cool even if it weren't on the Black Sea, with good beaches, open-air clubs at night, and day trips to resorts and rock-climbing spots hanging over the water (p240)
- **Sofia** Where most Euro-trippers check into Bulgaria; a student town with side-street strolls and a pet mountain just south, it can ruin a trans-continental itinerary (p229)
- **Best journey** If you have days, and boots, the climbs from Rila Monastery (p234) to mountain huts take in lush landscapes a couple of hours south of Sofia
- **Off-the-beaten track** The patch of Black Sea north of Kaliakra Cape is, so far, missed by the beach-resort crowds; shoot for Kamen Bryag (Stone Beach; p242)

FAST FACTS

- **Area** 110,910 sq km (about one-third of Finland)
- **ATMs** Widespread
- **Budget** 40lv to 64lv per day
- **Capital** Sofia
- **Country code** ☎ 359, international access code ☎ 00
- **Famous for** Black Sea beaches, 'cheap' ski runs, yogurt
- **Heads of State** President Georgi Parvanov, Prime Minister Sergei Stanishev
- **Language** Bulgarian
- **Money** leva (lv); A\$1 = 1.20lv; CA\$1 = 1.38lv; €1 = 1.96lv; ¥100 = 1.39lv; NZ\$1 = 1.07lv; US\$1 = 1.64lv; UK£1 = 2.85lv
- **Phrases** *Zdrasti* (hello), *blagodarya* (thank you),



imati li? (do you have?),
kolko strubo? (how much?),
oshte bira molya (another beer please)

- **Population** 8 million
- **Time** GMT/UTC + 2
- **Visas** Issued free on arrival for citizens of Australia, Canada, the EU, New Zealand, the USA and several other nations.

TRAVEL HINTS

If you're with a few others, Bulgaria has excellent car-rental deals (from €15 per day). Hire one and get lost in wee mountain villages.

ROAMING BULGARIA

Start in Sofia, between Belgrade and Greece or Turkey, then bus east to hill town Veliko Tŕnovo for kick-back time and views; finish with Black Sea dips in Varna.

The last postcommunist stop heading south, Bulgaria is having its coming-of-age party at last. For good and bad. Middle-aged Brits are buying up beach property, so free spots of Black Sea sand are running out, but there are still many pockets of Alplike mountain villages with

hut-to-hut walks in summer and very good ski runs in winter, not to mention at least a couple of stray golden-sand beaches. The EU – coming to Bulgaria with this book in 2007 – could change things all the more.

The ‘big four’ – Sofia, the busy capital; Veliko Târnovo, the chilled student town; Varna, the bustling sea hub; and Plovdiv, the Roman survivor in the plains – all have hostels and day trips that could detain you several days. The best is in-between them, where you’re still likely to spot shepherds taking their four-legged pals by whitewashed revival-era homes from the 19th century. Go explore now. Things may look different in a few years.

HISTORY

The first Slavs migrated to this Thracian (then Roman) ground in the 5th century AD, and the first Bulgarian state was formed in 681. The Byzantines conquered Bulgaria in 1014, but not until the state had created a language, the Cyrillic alphabet, a church and a people (a mix of Slavs, Proto-Bulgarians and Thracians).

Bulgaria’s second kingdom, based in Veliko Târnovo, lasted until the Ottoman army took over in 1396. The next 500 years were spent living ‘under the yoke’ of Ottoman rule.

During the 18th and 19th centuries, many laurel-stomping ‘awakeners’ are credited with reviving Bulgarian culture, including revolutionaries Georgi Rakovski, Vasil Levski and Hristo Botev. With Russia stepping in, the Ottoman army was defeated in 1878.

Hoping to annex Macedonia, Bulgaria aligned with Germany in WWII, but famously said ‘no’ to Hitler by refusing to send its Jewish population to concentration camps, sparing up to 50,000 lives. After the war, Bulgaria embraced communism wholeheartedly (even proposing in 1973 to join the USSR).

Since 1989, Bulgaria has stumbled slightly as a new democracy, well behind Eastern European countries such as Hungary, Poland and the Czech Republic. NATO said ‘yes’ to Bulgaria in 2004, then the EU welcomed Bulgaria (and Romania) in 2007 (though noted that Bulgaria’s record of corruption and organised crime would continue to be monitored). The construction business booms in Bulgaria, as does selling property (from €15,000 for a house) to Western Europeans. Sofia and the ski town Bansko are gearing up to make a case for the 2014 Winter Olympics.

THE CULTURE

Of Bulgaria’s eight million people, Bulgarians and Slavs constitute 83.5%. The largest minorities are Turks (9.5%) and Roma (4.6%), with smaller populations of Russians, Jews and Greeks.

Even if clearly lost or confused, ask for help – it’s rarely volunteered. Once you ask, locals often go out of their way to help.

RELIGION

During the communist era Bulgaria was officially atheist. These days about 84% of the population is Orthodox Christian and 12% is Muslim (almost all Sunni).

ARTS

Bulgaria’s proud 19th-century revival saw many town makeovers, with quaint traditionally styled *kâshita* buildings (whitewashed walls, wood-carved ceilings, hand-woven rugs).

Bulgaria’s most treasured art is on the walls of medieval monasteries and churches, such as the 19th-century paintings at Rila Monastery (p234).

The currently popular ‘wedding music’, aka *chalga*, is Turkish-sounding synth-pop with dumb lyrics. Essentially no-one in the country admits to liking Azis, a seriously flamboyant, sexually ambiguous *chalga* performer who sells many, many CDs.

For more traditional music, click on the TV – there are shows nightly.

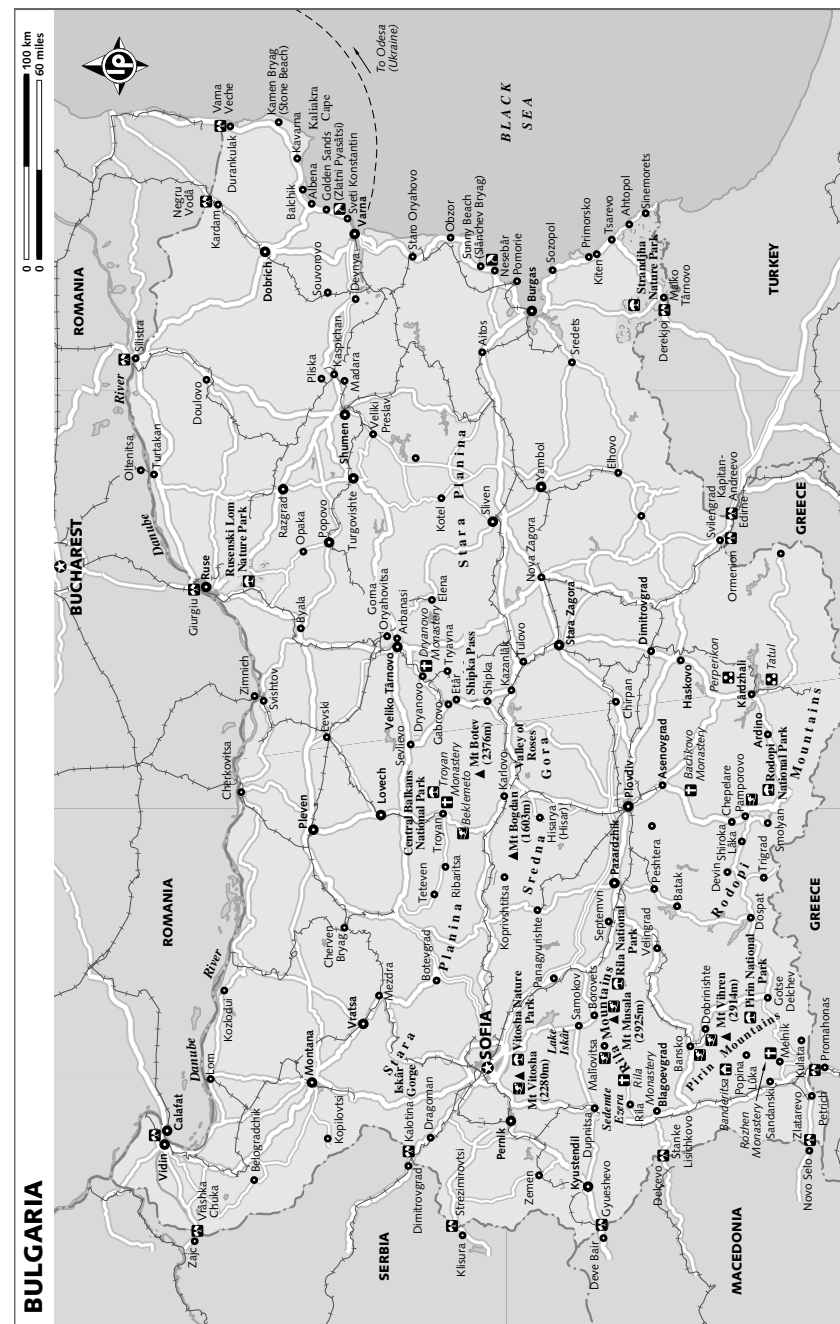
ENVIRONMENT

Bulgaria lies in the heart of the Balkan Peninsula, stretching 502km from the Serbian border to the Black Sea.

The Stara Planina (Balkan Mountain) range stretches across central Bulgaria. In the southwest are three higher ranges – the Rila Mountains (home to Mt Musala, Bulgaria’s highest

READING UP

Lonely Planet’s *Bulgaria* offers comprehensive coverage of the country. For history, RJ Crampton’s *A Concise History of Bulgaria* gives a quick overview from the pre-Thracians to postcommunism.



'YES OR NO?'

Bulgarians shake their head 'yes' and nod their head 'no'. Confusing at first, then fun. Just try to think that a shake is sweeping the floor clean ('yes, come in') and a nod is slamming shut a garage door ('no, go away'). If in doubt, ask 'Da ili ne?' (Yes or no?).

point at 2925m), Pirin Mountains and Rodopi Mountains.

Bulgaria has some 56,000 kinds of living creatures, including bears, wild goats and deer. It maintains four national parks (Rila, Pirin, Rodopi and Central Balkans) and 10 nature parks.

TRANSPORT

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Bulgaria's most active airports are Sofia and (in summer) Varna and Burgas. There is no additional departure tax levied at the airport.

Airlines flying to/from Bulgaria have offices in Sofia:

Air France (code AF; ☎ 02-939 7010, airport 937 3207; www.airfrance.com; ul Säborna 5)

Alitalia (code AZ; ☎ 02-981 6702; www.alitalia.it; ul Graf Ignatiev 40)

Austrian Airlines (code OS; ☎ 02-980 2323; www.aa.com; bul Vitosha 41)

British Airways (code BA; ☎ 02-945 7000, airport 945 9227; www.britishairways.com)

Bulgaria Air (code FB; ☎ 02-937 3243, 02-865 9557; www.air.bg; airport)

Czech Airlines (ESA; code OK; ☎ 02-937 3175; www.csa.cz/en)

Hemus Air (code DU; ☎ 02-981 8330; www.hemusair.bg; airport)

LOT (code LO; ☎ 02-987 4562; www.lot.com; bul Aleksandr Stambulski 27A)

Lufthansa (code LH; ☎ 02-937 3141, 02-980 4242; www.lufthansa.com; airport)

KLM (code KLM; ☎ 02-981 9910; www.klm.com; ul Patriarh Estimi 36B)

Hungarian Airlines (Malév; code MA; ☎ 02-945 9239; www.malev.com; airport)

SkyEurope (code NE; www.skyeurope.com) Between Bratislava and Sofia.

Turkish Airlines (code TK; ☎ 02-945 9145, 02-988 3596; www.turkishairlines.com)

Wizz Air (code W6; www.wizz.com) Between Budapest and Sofia all year, from London to Burgas and Sofia in summer only.

Boat

You can take a ferry across the Danube River from Vidin or Ruse. From Varna, the ferry service to Odesa, Ukraine, runs weekly from May through September.

Bus

International tickets to the region (and beyond – except for Romania, which has no bus links) are available at practically any bus station in the country. There's not one set price, so it's worth checking a couple of companies to find the cheapest fare.

Car & Motorcycle

Drivers pay a variable road tax (say you're going to the nearest big city) and €10 'disinfection fee' upon entering Bulgaria.

Train

Tickets for international trains can be bought at any **Rila Bureau** (www.bdz-rila.com/) or at some stations' dedicated ticket offices.

The daily *Trans-Balkan Express* (between Budapest and Thessaloniki, Greece) stops at Ruse, Gorna Oryahovitsa (near Veliko Târnovo), Sofia and Sandanski. There is a daily train connecting Sofia with Belgrade and Istanbul.

The *Bulgaria Express* (between Sofia and Moscow) runs once weekly, or three times in summer.

From mid-June through to September, a train service leaves Varna (and another Burgas) for Bucharest, Budapest, Bratislava and Prague. There is also a summer train connecting Bucharest with Sofia via Ruse and Gorna Oryahovitsa.

KEY BORDER CROSSINGS

The most popular entry/exit point from the north is by train between Belgrade and Sofia; another is the Ruse–Giurgiu border between Bucharest and Sofia or Veliko Târnovo; occasionally the wait for customs there is long. Other key crossings are into Greece, south of Sofia at Kulata–Promahonas, and southeast of Plovdiv at Svilengrad–Ormenion.

EMERGENCY NUMBERS

- Ambulance ☎ 150
- Fire ☎ 160
- Police ☎ 166

GETTING AROUND

Air

Hemus Air (code DU; www.hemusair.bg) connects Sofia and Varna daily (one-way about €65), with extra flights in summer, when there are flights to Burgas (one-way about €65).

Bicycle

Traffic is relatively light outside the cities on many highways, but winding curves in the mountains and/or potholes anywhere can be obstacles.

Bulgaria has few bike-rental options (try Sofia, Koprivstitsa and Veliko Târnovo), but most towns have bike shops that can make repairs or sell parts.

Bus

This chapter lists the price and duration of trips and number of buses daily – use these as a gauge only. Check http://bus.light-bg.com/english/input_engl.html for nationwide bus info; Sofia's bus station site (www.centralnaavtogara.bg) is also useful.

Bigger bus stations have a confusing array of private bus booths advertising the same destinations. The public bus stops generally have a few windows and a list of timetables outside. In most cases, buses leave between around 7am and 6pm.

Most bus stations have a left-luggage service.

Car & Motorcycle

If you're with a gang of four, are 21 and have a driver's licence from your country, renting a car from a local agent can be a good way to beach hop or drive on mountain back roads (from €18 to €25 per day in bigger cities). See p234.

Train

Trains, all run by the Bulgarian State Railways (BDZh), are a bit cheaper than buses, but take longer. *Ekspresen* (express) and *bârz* (fast) trains zip along at a speed akin to a bus, while the slow *pâticheski* (passenger) trains tinker along.

Listings in this chapter are for 2nd-class seats and off-season schedules. First-class seats – usually costing an extra leva or two – are in six-seat carriages, 2nd-class in eight-seat carriages. Check updated schedules at www.bdz.bg.

Europe-wide rail passes are not good value in Bulgaria.

Bring food and water on board with you. Most train stations are signposted in Cyrillic. Nearly all train stations have left-luggage offices.

SOFIA СОФИЯ

☎ 02 / pop 1,114,000

Bulgaria's biggest city and main hub struggles in comparison with Eastern European giants up north. But there are good hostels, a gold-brick centre for strolling, the best 'pet mountain' (Mt Vitosha) – with hikes and ski runs – any capital could hope for, and enough happening clubs and cheap pizza slices to keep visitors poking around for several happy days.

Lived in by Thracians, Romans and now Bulgarians for up to 7000 years, Sofia was an outpost of 1200 residents when it became the nation's unlikely fourth capital in 1879.

ORIENTATION

Bul Maria Luisa runs from the train station to pl Sveta Nedelya; extending south of the square towards the National Palace of Culture (NDK) is ritzy bul Vitosha. East of pl Sveta Nedelya, along ul Tsar Osvoboditel, are many government buildings with pl Aleksander Nevski a block north. Several city maps with transport routes are available to buy from newsstands and bookshops.

INFORMATION

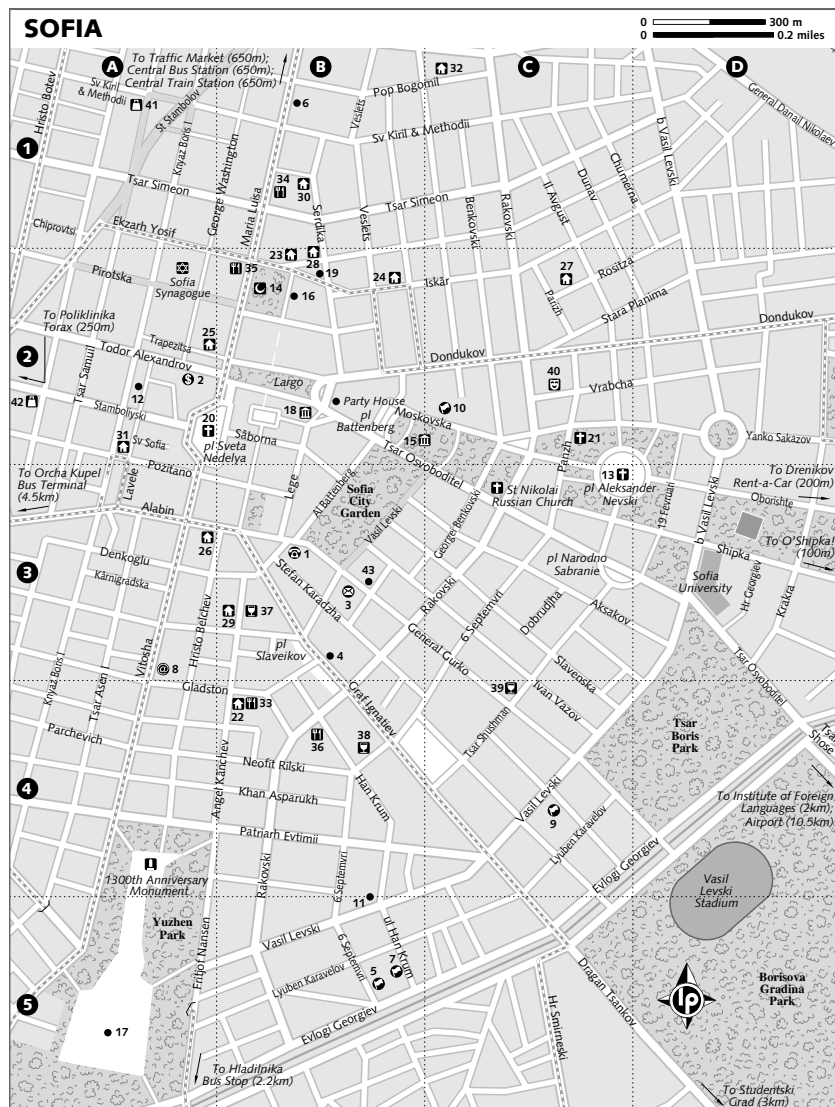
Bookshops

Dom na Knigata (☎ 981 7897; ul Graf Ignatiev;

☎ 10am-7pm) Messy racks of paperbacks in English and other languages.

SCAMS

Pickpockets sometimes troll bul Vitosha, particularly around Sveta Nedelya Cathedral and outside the train station. Cab drivers often con travellers by charging exorbitant amounts.



Emergency

Police (☎ 166; 24hr) Between 8am and 6pm you (allegedly) can reach an English-speaking operator at ☎ 988 5239 or a French-speaking one at ☎ 982 3028.

Internet Access

Site (bul Vitoshka 45; per hr 2lv; ☎ 24hr) Make international calls for 0.22lv per minute.

Medical Services

Poliklinika Torax (☎ 988 5259, 980 5791; bul Stamboliyski 57; ☎ 24hr) A good private clinic with English-speaking doctors west of the centre.

Money

Bulbank (ul Lavele & Todor Alexandrov; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) Changes travellers cheques.

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Post

Central Post Office (☎ 980 4800; ul General Gurko) Hours vary widely.

Telephone

BTC (ul General Gurko; ☎ 24hr) Charges 0.36 lv per minute for international calls.

Travel Agencies

EBP Tours (☎ 0888 922 916; Traffic Market, office 61; ☎ 6.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri, 6.30am-2pm Sat & Sun) Bus station agent books tickets and helps with accommodation; there's also an office in the train station basement.

Usit Colours (☎ 937 3175; ul Vasil Levski 35; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Sells ISIC cards (10lv).

Zig Zag (☎ 980 5102; www.zigzagbg.com; bul Stamboliyski 20V; ☎ 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, daily in summer) Super-helpful staff charge a 5lv consultation fee to book rooms or give advice on hikes and activities around the country. Check website for organised tours (hiking, kayaking, horse-riding). Enter from ul Lavele.

Visas

Immigration Office (☎ 982 3316; bul Maria Luisa 48; ☎ foreigner services 11am-noon Mon-Thu) This hectic office can extend visas.

SIGHTS & ACTIVITIES

Ploshad Aleksander Nevski

Gold domed and massive, **Aleksander Nevski Church** (pl Aleksander Nevski; admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm) is the city's focal point. Built between 1892 and 1912, it's named after a Russian warrior. In its basement, the **Aleksander Nevski Crypt** (☎ 981 5775; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 10.30am-6.30pm Tue-Sun) features many national icons dating to the 5th century AD.

On the sidewalks leading to the church from ul Rakovski are stalls selling communist-era tidbits.

Earthquake-battered **Sveta Sofia Church** (admission free; ☎ 7am-6pm or 7pm) inspired the name of the city.

Around Sofia City Garden

Facing this fountain-filled park is the former Royal Palace. It's now two museums, including the valuable **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 988 1974; ul Tsar Osoboditel; admission 3lv; ☎ 10am-5.30pm Tue-Sun Apr-Nov, 11am-3.30pm Tue-Sun Dec-Mar).

Across from the Party House is the **President's Building** (both closed to the public), the site of the boot sole-slapping **changing of the guards**, staged on the hour during daylight hours.

Around Ploshad Sveta Nedelya

In the heart of pl Sveta Nedelya is well-lit, ornate **Sveta Nedelya Cathedral** (admission free; ☎ 7am-7pm).

North on bul Maria Luisa, behind unmistakable **Banya Bashi Mosque** (admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) is the red-and-gold **mineral baths** (aka Turkish Baths), undergoing a looongo renovation. Across the street, locals fill – with fervour – bottles at the modern **spring wells**.

South 1km from pl Sveta Nedelya, via ritzy bul Vitoshka, is the huge **NDK** (National Palace of Culture) complex, with a viewing deck (sometimes closed).

COURSES

The **Institute of Foreign Languages** (☎ 710 069; www.deo.uni-sofia.bg; ul Kosta Lulchev 27), south of town, offers language, song and dance courses.

SLEEPING Hostels

Prices here include breakfast and free internet, and are for summer; most drop by €1 or €2 in winter. Some places offer pick-up service if you reserve ahead.

Sofia Hostel (☎ 989 8582; www.hostelsofia.com; ul Pozitano 16; dm incl breakfast €10) Bulgaria's first hostel has handmade decorations, giving it a kindergarten feel (in a good way). Two dorm rooms, one with balcony.

Hostel Mostel (☎ 0889 223 296; www.hostelmostel.com; ul Denkgolu 2; dm/s/d incl breakfast €10/25/30; 🏠) Lovingly run by a Bulgarian couple, the sprightly Mostel has a private room and a couple of dorm rooms, with spill-over dorms in a nearby apartment when it gets busy. Extras include night-lights in the private room, hand soap stocked in the clean bathrooms, and staff who gush with info and try to keep things quiet after 11pm.

Art Hostel (☎ 987 0545; www.art-hostel.com; ul Angel Kanchev 21a; dm incl breakfast €10) This laid-back, nook-and-craney hostel has a leafy courtyard out back. Things keep going late.

Other choices:

Sofia Backpacker's Inn (☎ 983 1672; www.sofiabackpackersinn.dir.bg; ul Struma 6; dm/r incl breakfast 18/48lv; 🏠) Japanese-owned, with a side-street locale.

Kervan Hostel (☎ 983 9428; www.kervanhostel.com; ul Rositza 3; dm incl breakfast €10) Homey, with bikes to rent.

Internet Hostel (☎ 989 9419; interhostel@yahoo.co.uk; ul Alabin 50A, 2nd fl; dm €8-10; 🏠) Cramped sitting area.

Red Star Hostel (☎ 986 3341; ul Angel Kanchev, 3rd fl; dm incl breakfast €8-10, s €18-20, d €24-28; 🏠) Internet's nicer cousin.

Homestays

The train station has an iffy run accommodation bureau. Art Hostel (www.art-hostel.com) offers some nice apartments (from €45 for a double).

Markela Accommodation Agency (☎ 980 4925; markela@gmail.bg; ul Ekzarh Yosif 35, rm 103; 🕒 8.30am-7.30pm Mon-Fri, 9.30am-4.30pm Sat & Sun) Finds private, clean single rooms for 26lv to 33lv, doubles for 34lv to 40lv.

Hotels

Hotel Maya (☎ 980 2796; ul Trapezitsa 4; s/d 30/40lv) A central guesthouse with 12 rooms with precapitalism furnishings on either side of a rooftop courtyard overlooking TsUM shop-

ping centre. Private bathrooms are down the hall. No English.

The Rooms (☎ 983 3508; the.roomshostel@yahoo.com; ul Pop Bogomil 10; r 40lv, s sometimes 20lv) A purple-and-gold house on a grey street, the six-room guesthouse offers tidy but tiny themed rooms with no TV.

Hotel Iskâr (☎ 986 6750; ul Iskâr 11; r 40-53lv; 🏠) For a simple but welcoming, midrange deal, the Iskâr's 11 rooms are tough to beat. Breakfast is 4lv.

EATING

Look for new places between bul Vitosha and ul Rakovski. Cheap pizza slices and kebabs are available everywhere.

Tsentralni Khali (cnr bul Maria Luisa & ul Ekzarh Yosif; 🕒 7am-midnight) This refurbished, covered market dates from 1909 and offers fresh produce, sausage, ice cream and cheap meals.

Trops Kâshta (ul Maria Luisa 26; salads 1lv, mains 1.50-3lv; 🕒 8am-8.30pm) For cheap, fast, point-and-eat cafeteria-style food, Trops is your new comrade. It's half price after 8pm.

Dream House (ul Alabin 50A; mains 2.10-3.70lv; 🕒 11am-10pm) This all-vegetarian mint-green restaurant offers inspired options (including 18 vegan choices!) plus a Sunday buffet for 5lv.

Divaka (☎ 989 9543; ul Gladston 54; grills 1.20-10lv, mains 1.90-10lv; 🕒 24hr) A sprawling modern four-room restaurant filled with low-cost traditional fare – grilled meat, fish fillets and vegetarian options.

Ugo (ul Khan Krum 2; pizza 2-7.10lv; 🕒 24hr) Twenty-something couples date and meet up at this slick, modern pizza-and-pasta chain.

DRINKING

Look for *Programata's* free annual *Club Guide* for listings in English.

Poison's (ul Tsar Shushman 22; 🕒 10am-2am) This place has a shady outdoor space, which fills with 20-something locals.

Hambara (ul 6 Septemvri 22; 🕒 8pm-late) Low-key, candle-lit Hambara is unsigned and down a dark path.

Escape (☎ 0887 468 005; ul Angel Kanchev 1; admission 3-5lv; 🕒 8.30pm-late) A favourite disco.

O'Shipka! (☎ 944 1288; ul Shipka 11; 🕒 24hr) The basement club of a pizza place has a very welcoming vibe and interesting rock shows or arty slide deals (entry free to 3lv).

A few kilometres south of the centre, **Studentski Grad** (Student Town) is literally that:

an enclave of college students living in drab communist-era apartment blocks with the city's hippest cafés and bars below. Get there by minibus 7 from bul Maria Luisa or No 8 along ul Rakovski (one-way 1.50lv).

ENTERTAINMENT

Sofia Echo (www.sofiaecho.com; 2.40lv) is a weekly English-language paper with entertainment listings. Freebies include the monthly *Sofia City* (www.sofiacityguide.com).

Opera is taken seriously in this country and the **National Opera House** (☎ 987 1366; www.geobiz.com/sfopera; ul Vrabcha 1) features Sofia's best. Try **United Cinema Multiplex** (☎ 951 5101; NDK; tickets 4-6lv) for Hollywood films.

SHOPPING

Souvenir shop (ul Tsar Osvoboditel; 🕒 10am-6pm) At the Ethnographical Museum, slightly pricey.

Stenata (☎ 980 5491; ul www.stenata.com; ul Bratya Miladinovi 5; 🕒 10am-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat) Bulgaria's best outfitter for the outdoors-bound and active.

Ladies Market (ul St Stambolov; 🕒 dawn-dusk) A lively, messy market (mostly food).

GETTING THERE & AWAY

Air

Hemus Air (code DU; www.hemusair.bg) flies to Varna and Burgas. The airport's departures terminal has an **information booth** (☎ 937 2211), ATMs and car-rental agencies.

Bus

DOMESTIC BUSES

Modern and highly efficient, Sofia's **Central Bus Station** (☎ 813 3232; www.centralnaavtogara.bg; bul Maria Luisa; 🕒 24hr) is 100m south of the train station, with assorted stands (serving some international destinations) in the **'Traffic Market'** in between. The following bus routes are frequent unless otherwise noted.

Belogradchik 10lv, four hours, one daily (Traffic Market)

Burgas 17lv to 18lv, 5½ hours

Koprivshitsa 6lv, two hours, two daily

Plovdiv 8lv, two hours

Ruse 14lv, 4½ hours

Varna 22lv to 24lv, six hours

Veliko Târnovo 12lv to 13lv, 3½ hours

From the **Ovcha Kupel Bus Terminal** (aka Zapad; ☎ 955 5362) there are a couple of daily buses to Rila town. Get to the terminal on bus 260 from pl Ruski Pametnik or tram 5 from pl

GETTING INTO TOWN

Sofia's main bus and train stations are next to each other, about 500m north of the start of the centre. Take tram 1, 7 or 14 from outside the train station to central pl Sveta Nedelya. Buy a ticket from food stands inside the station; note that officials often check for validated tickets on this route and you'll need to punch a ticket for larger bags too! Alternatively, the **OK Taxi** (☎ 973 2121) stands in front of the airport terminal (about 8lv) and central bus station are dependable.

Makedonia, which is west of the centre on ul Alabin.

INTERNATIONAL BUSES

Many bus companies sell tickets to bordering countries and beyond. Ticket prices can vary, so ask around at the Traffic Market. **Matpu** (☎ 981 5653; www.matpu.com; Traffic Market, office 58) is a good agency.

Sample trips:

Athens 98lv, 12 to 13 hours, one or two daily (Tuesday to Sunday)

Belgrade 35lv to 59lv, nine hours, two daily

Istanbul 34lv to 40lv, eight to 10 hours, eight daily

Skopje 20lv to 24lv, six hours, three or four daily

Thessaloniki 43lv, six to seven hours, two daily

Train

Sofia's **Central Train Station** (☎ 931 1111; www.bdz.bg; bul Maria Luisa) lists departures and arrivals in English on a large computer screen on the main floor. Buy same-day tickets for Vidin, Ruse and Varna on the main floor; all other domestic destinations are downstairs. Advance tickets are available at another office downstairs.

International tickets must be purchased at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 932 3346; 🕒 24hr) on the main floor, or at its **centre office** (☎ 987 0777; ul General Gurko 5; 🕒 7am-6.30pm Mon-Sat).

Sample train routes:

Athens 64/84lv seat/sleeper, 12½ hours, three daily

Belgrade 26lv, 7½ hours, two daily

Bucharest 36/54lv seat/sleeper, 10½ hours, two daily

Burgas 14.30lv, 6½ to 7½ hours, five daily

Gorna Oryahovitsa (near Veliko Târnovo) 10.70lv, 4½ hours, 10 daily

Koprivshitsa 3.50lv, two to 2½ hours, five daily

Istanbul 36.50lv, 14½ hours, one daily

Plovdiv 8.80lv, 2½ hours, 12 daily
Ruse 14.30lv, seven hours, four daily
Varna 18.70lv, 7½ to 8½ hours, six daily

GETTING AROUND Car & Motorcycle

Drenikov Rent-a-Car (☎ 944 9532; www.drenikov.com; ul Oborishte 55; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat & Sun) rents cars from €15 per day – tax is waived if you pay in cash.

Public Transport

Sofia's trams, buses and metro line run 5.30am to 11pm and use the same ticket system. A single ride is 0.50lv, a day pass is 2.25lv. There are no transfers. Blue ticket booths are near most stops and many newsstands sell tickets too. Single-ride tickets must be validated once you board.

Minibuses ply many useful city routes at 1.50lv per ride.

AROUND SOFIA

BOYANA БОЯНА

Now officially a part of Sofia, hillside Boyana has the capital's best museum, the **National Historical Museum** (☎ 955 4280; www.historymuseum.org; bul Okolovrusten Pat; adult/student 10/7lv, guide 10lv; ☎ 9.30am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5.30pm Nov-Mar). Treasured pieces include the world's oldest gold (4th millennium BC) and Thracian horse decorations. It's in a former presidential residence.

Built between the 11th and 19th centuries, the inside walls of the **Boyana Church** (☎ 959 0939; adult/student 10/5lv; ☎ 9.30am-5pm), 1.5km south of the museum, have some 90 medieval frescoes, which are certainly among Bulgaria's finest.

Take tram 9 down ul Khristo Botev to Hladilnika bus stop, where bus 64 goes past the museum to the east then within 200m of the church.

VITOSHA ВИТОША

The feather in Sofia's cap, this mountain range is part of the Vitosha Nature Park, with ski runs operating from mid-December to April (Aleko is the main centre) and dozens of well-marked trails accessed by public bus or chairlift.

Get the trail map *Vitosha Turisticheska Karta* (1:50,000) in Cyrillic (5lv) in Sofia.

Chairlifts run all year. **Dragalevtsi** (☎ 961 2189) is 2km up from the village; it's 2lv to take two lifts to Goli Vrah mountain. More expensive **Simeonovo** sends gondolas to the peaks. It's 5lv to Aleko, a popular base for hikes and more ski lifts. Lift tickets up top cost 22lv, night skiing is 12lv.

From Sofia's **Hladilnika bus stop** (ul Srebarna), near bul Cherni Vrah 2km south of the NDK, take bus 122 to Simeonovo and No 64 to Dragalevtsi or Boyana.

SOUTHERN BULGARIA

Bulgaria's mountainous southwest brims with rocky peaks, scores of well-signed hiking trails and skiing (at Bansko, Borovets and Pamporovo). South of Sofia are the Alplike Rila (www.rilanationalpark.org) and Pirin (www.pirin-np.com) Mountains near Greece. Just east are the culturally rich Rodopi Mountains. North, in the Thracian plain, is Plovdiv.

Drop by Zig Zag (p231) in Sofia for tips on activities.

RILA MONASTERY РИЛСКИ МАНАСТИР

☎ 07054

Many Bulgarians say you haven't been to Bulgaria without paying your respects to this **monastery** (admission free; ☎ 6am-9pm or 10pm) 120km south of Sofia. Set in a forested valley, it's near excellent hikes (multiday ones lead to *hizhas*; mountain huts). Guided day trips start at €20 from Sofia – they're often easier than a DIY day trip.

Built in 927, and heavily restored in 1469, the monastery helped keep Bulgarian culture and language alive during the Ottoman rule.

The monastery's 300 monks' cells fill four levels of colourful balconies, overlooking the mural-filled **Nativity Church**, built in the 1830s.

If you have time, hike up the **Tomb of St Ivan** (grobyat na Sv Ivan Rilski). To reach the 15-minute hike up the clearly marked trail, walk 3.7km east on the road behind the monastery.

There are hotels and camping grounds nearby; you can sleep in the monastery's **rooms** (☎ 2208; with private/shared bathroom €15/10).

At the time of research there were no direct buses from Sofia, but a lone one (at 3pm) back to the city. To get there, bus from Sofia's

Ovcha Kupel Bus Terminal to Rila village (6lv, two hours). At research time, one left Sofia at 10.20am, reaching Rila in time for a 12.40pm bus to the monastery.

Rila village has a hotel and ATM.

PLOVDIV ПЛОВДИВ

☎ 032 / pop 341,500

A dozen kilometres north of the Rodopi Mountains, revival-era *Hansel & Gretel* homes lean over cobbled paths in Plovdiv's Old Town. So many Roman ruins loiter around the city's seven hills – wait, make that six (the communists flattened one) – that it's kind of ridiculous. The Plov is a more leisurely introduction to Bulgaria than Sofia, but busier than Veliko Tarnovo.

Plovdiv was known as Philippopolis to the Romans in the 3rd century AD, but it was settled thousands of years earlier by Thracians.

Orientation

Plovdiv's train station and Yug Bus Terminal are about 600m (a 20-minute walk) southwest of the central pl Sentralen. From the square, the main pedestrian mall, ul Knyaz Aleksandăr, stretches 500m north to pl Dzhumaya. East from pl Dzhumaya, via ul Săborna, is Old Town.

On arrival, take bus 7, 20 or 26 in front of the train station (0.60lv) and exit on ul Tsar Boris III Obedinitel past the tunnel to reach Old Town.

Information

Bulbank (ul Ivan Vazov 4; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri)

Call Centre (ul Balkan; international calls per min 0.15lv; ☎ 9.30am-11pm Mon-Sat, noon-8pm Sun)

Inter Jet Tours (☎ 635 001; www.interjet-bg.com; ul Knyaz Aleksandăr 35, 2nd fl; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) Arranges treks and rents cars (from €15 per day).

Left Luggage The train station has 24-hour luggage storage (2lv per piece per day); the Yug Bus Terminal holds small bags for 0.50lv per day.

Speed (ul Knyaz Aleksandăr 10; per hr 0.60lv; ☎ 24hr) Internet café with international call service (0.12lv per minute).

Sights

OLD TOWN

Old Town – with lanes of antiques shops and outdoor cafés – is a living museum. Seeing the 22 rooms inside the area's most striking building (built in 1847) is an added bonus to the country's finest **Ethnographical Museum**

(☎ 625 654; ul Dr Chomakov 2; admission 4lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 2-5 or 5.30pm) – with *Star Wars*-like masked *kukeri* costumes.

The Roman **Theatre of Ancient Philippopolis** (admission 3lv; ☎ 9am-5.30pm summer, 9am-5.30pm Wed-Sun winter) is easily seen from outside the gates, but entry lets you tread on the worn, 2000-year-old steps.

OTHER SIGHTS

Plovdivniks love their hills (big mounds really). Climb the **Hill of the Liberators** – with the statue of Alyosha (a Russian soldier) – for views.

Dzhumaya Mosque (pl Dzhumaya; admission free; ☎ dawn-dusk) – the first in Balkan Europe – initially dates from 1368, but was redone after a 1928 earthquake (note the cracks inside).

The nation's biggest canal, the 2.5km **Green Canal**, 1km west of the centre, hosts rowing races and is surrounded by shady Loven Park. Take bus 10 west and walk 200m.

An interesting DIY day trip is to the hilltop fortress 20km south in the town **Asenovgrad**.

Sleeping HOSTELS

Hiker's Hostel (☎ 0885 194 553; www.hikers-hostel.org; ul Săborna 53; dm/d incl breakfast 20/48lv; ☎) Plovdiv's top backpacker stop is this little house in Old Town. The eight-bunk dorm room is kept clean, while the cramped private room is really a converted storage space.

Tourist's House (Turisicheska Kăshata; ☎ 635 115; ul Slaveikov 5; dm 20lv) Just down the backside of Old Town's hill, this 19th-century, three-storey 'hostel' – briefly closed at last pass, but reopening – has cheap beds in a great building.

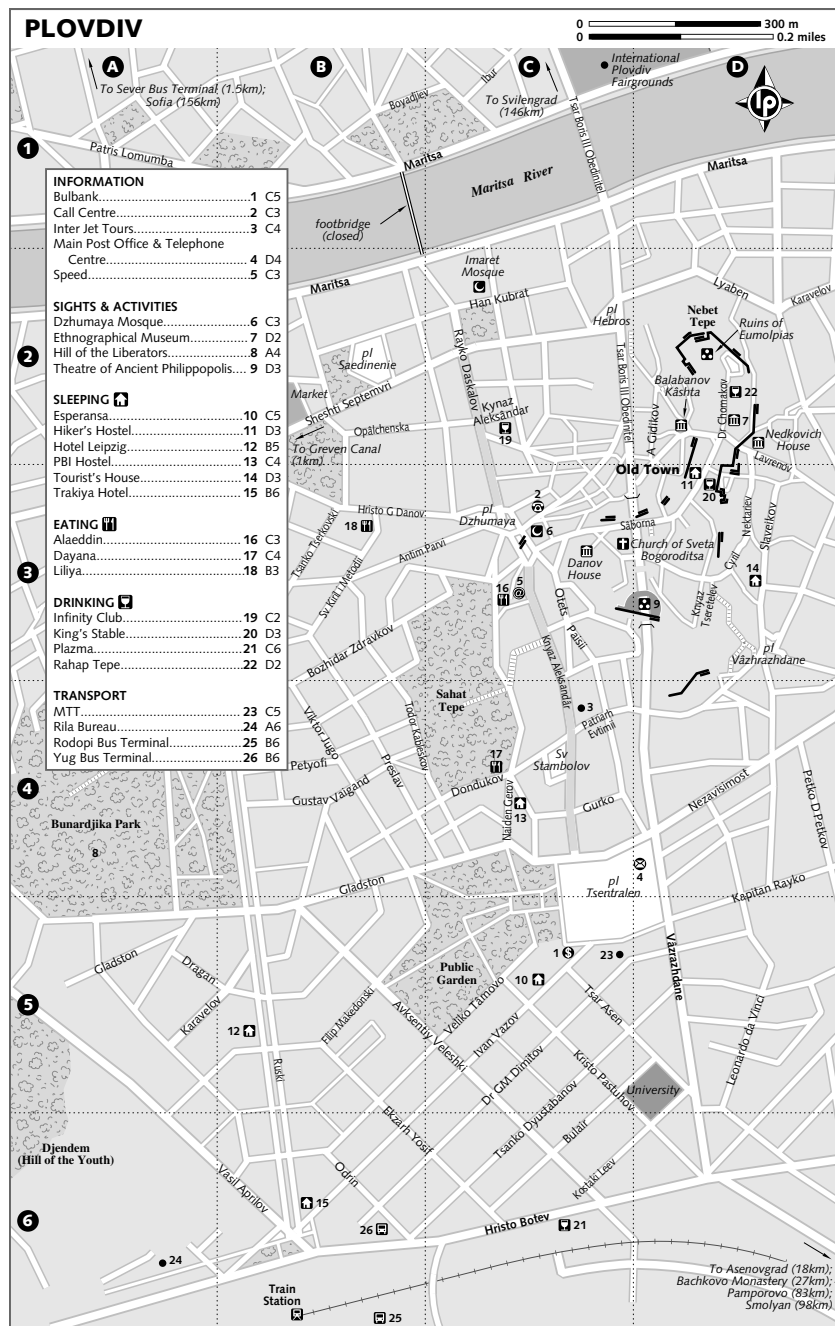
PBI Hostel (☎ 326 384; www.pbihotel.com; ul Naiden Gerov 13; dm/r €10/15; ☎) Maybe PBI means 'problems being in', as staff frequently aren't around to let travellers into its functional, three-dorm space.

HOMESTAYS

If a cuddly tout doesn't find you on arrival, a reliable agency is **Esperansa** (☎ 260 653, 0897 944 951; ul Ivan Vazov 14) a nine-minute walk from the main stations. It arranges rooms in homes (from 20/30lv for a single/double).

HOTELS

Trakiya Hotel (☎ 622 355; ul Ivan Vazov 84; s/d 30/60lv) This cheerful place is near the train and main bus stations.



Hotel Leipzig (☎ 632 250; www.leipzig.bg; bul Ruski 70; s/d incl breakfast from 40/50lv; ☑) West of the centre, this 120-room hotel's East German name gives an idea of when it was built. Higher floors get great views.

Eating

Kebabs and pizza stands (for 1lv or 1.50lv) are everywhere. King of both, however, is ally-hub **Alaeddin** (ul Knyaz Aleksandâr; two duners 1lv, pizza slice 1.50lv; ☎ 24 hr).

Liliya (ul sv Kiril u Metodii 2; dishes 1-2lv; ☎ 7am-8pm Mon-Fri, 8am-6pm Sat) A bustling pick-and-point cafeteria where prices drop by 20% after 4pm.

Dayana (ul Dondukov; grills from 2.20lv; ☎ 24hr) Aside the rocky walls of Sahat Tepe hill, this sprawling spot has tasty Bulgarian grill items, plus a host of vegetarian options (3.20lv).

Drinking

Rahap Tepe (ul Dr Chomakov; ☎ 10am-midnight Apr-Oct) Atop Nebet Tepe hill, this is a great open-air snack'n'slurp spot.

King's Stable (ul Sâborna; cocktails 3.40lv, sandwiches 1.80lv; ☎ 8.30am-2am Apr-Oct) This leafy, decked bar (behind Zlatyo Boyadjiev House) serves Plovdiv's cool kids.

Popular nightclubs include **Infinity Club** (☎ 0888 281 431; ul Bratya Pulievi 4; ☎ 10pm-late) and **Plazma** (☎ 624 761; bul Hristo Botev 82; ☎ 10pm-8am Wed-Sat).

Getting There & Away

BUS

Yug Bus Terminal (☎ 626 916; bul Hristo Botev), 100m east of the train station, sends frequent buses to Sofia (9lv to 10lv, two hours) every half-hour or hour, plus a couple of daily buses to Varna (9.20lv, seven hours) and Burgas (14lv, four hours), and 10 daily buses to Istanbul (25lv to 30lv, six hours).

More than 1km north of the river, **Sever Bus Terminal** (☎ 935 705) has one daily bus to Koprivshtitsa (6.50lv, two hours) and three daily buses to Veliko Târnovo (10lv, 4½ hours). Get there by minibus 4 from ul Tsar Boris III Obedinitel, or by taxi (about 2lv or so).

About 100m south of the Yug bus station, **Rodopi Bus Terminal** (☎ 765 160), accessible by underpass from the train station, sends buses into the Rodopi Mountains, stopping in Asenovgrad.

MTT (☎ 624 274; pl Tsentralen; ☎ 7am-5pm Mon & Thu, 9am-7pm Tue, 6.30am-7pm Wed, 6.30am-6.30pm Fri &

Sun, 7am-3pm Sat), next to the Trimontium Hotel, sells international tickets.

TRAIN

Daily direct trains from the **train station** (☎ 622 729; bul Hristo Botev) include: Burgas (12.80lv, five hours, three or more daily), Istanbul (35/48lv seat/sleeper, 11 hours, one daily), Sofia (6.50lv, 2½ hours, frequent), Varna (16.70lv, six hours, three daily) and Veliko Târnovo (8.90lv, six hours, at least one daily).

For international tickets, go to **Rila Bureau** (☎ 643 120; bul Hristo Botev 31A; ☎ 8am-6pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat).

CENTRAL BULGARIA

Bulgaria's broad belly is pierced by the surprisingly high Stara Planina (Old Mountain) range (www.staraplanina.org), the local name for the Balkans. The mountains are bordered by plains, with windswept cities at certain access points. Many hiking paths (some of which can be cross-country skied or biked) lead to mountain huts.

VELIKO TÂRNOVO ВЕЛИКО ТЪРНОВО

☎ 062 / pop 66,200

Here you go – a medieval Bulgarian capital off the Bucharest–Istanbul tracks with a massive citadel and revival-era homes. Veliko leans over a sharp S-shaped gorge split open by a snaking river. It's a welcoming, laid-back student town in the hills, with good hiking, rock-climbing, biking and day-trip opportunities looming nearby.

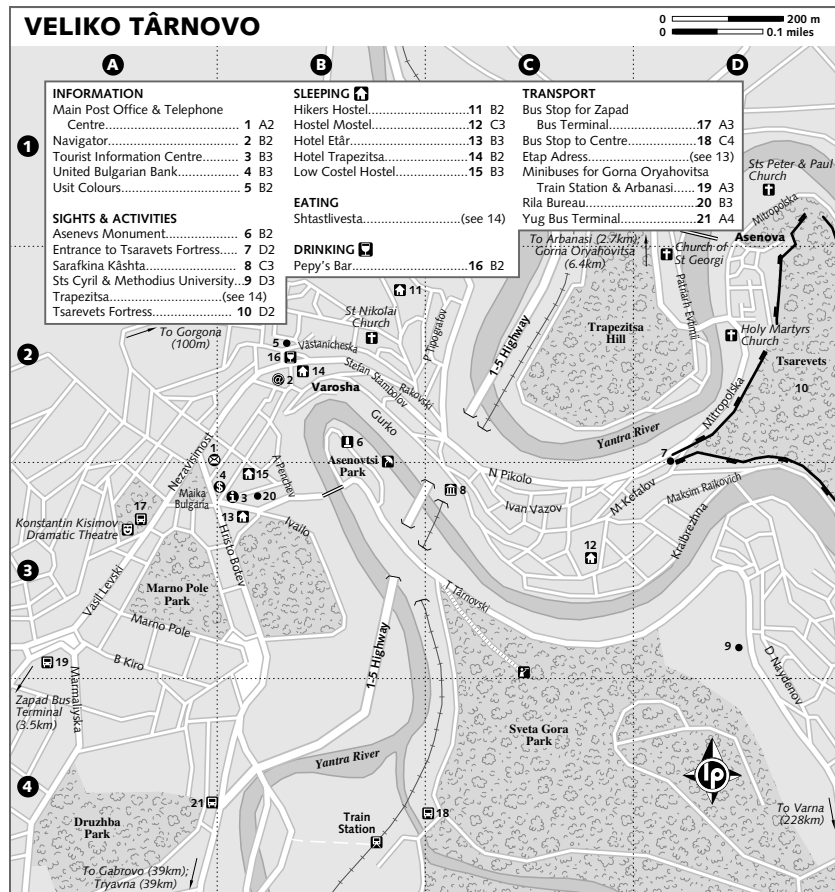
Orientation

From the train platform, a walkway heads northwest towards an underpass that leads to ul Hristo Botev, near the Yug Bus Terminal. Alternatively, there are several buses to the centre from in front of the train station. From the bus station, it's an inclined walk up to pl Maika Bulgaria, where ul Vasil Levski heads west and the main crawl, ul Nezavisimost, heads east.

Information

Navigator (ul Nezavisimost 3; per hr 0.50-0.80lv; ☎ 24hr) International calls for 0.19lv per minute. There's a laundry service next door (open 8am to 9.30pm).

Tourist Information Centre (☎ 22 148; www.velikotarnovo.info; ul Hristo Botev; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat



Apr-Oct, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri Nov-Mar) Arranges private accommodation, books rental cars for 30lv a day and offers hiking tips.

United Bulgarian Bank (ul Hristo Botev; ☎ 8.30am-4.30pm Mon-Fri) Cashes travellers cheques.

USIT Colours (☎ 601 751; pl Slaveikov 7; ☎ 9.30am-6.30pm Mon-Fri) Sells student cards for 10lv.

Sights

TSAREVETS FORTRESS

About 1km from the centre, this mammoth **citadel** (admission 4lv; ☎ 8am-7pm Apr-Sep, 9am-5pm Oct-Mar) sits stoic and sprawling on a site shared over the centuries by Thracians, Romans and Byzantines. What's seen now – a triangular, high-walled fortress – was largely built between the 5th and 12th centuries.

The after-dark, 40-minute **sound and light show** (☎ 636 828; admission 12lv) lights up the sky when enough tourists shell out 360lv (total), but can be watched for free outside the gates with ease.

Buses 200, 400 and 110 go between the centre and here.

OTHER SIGHTS

Below the citadel, the old **Asenova quarter** is home to a smattering of Byzantine-influenced churches (often closed) and a wood-plank bridge over the river, and is worth taking a look.

Sarafkina Kâshta (ul Gurko 88; adult/student 4/2lv; ☎ 9am-noon & 1-6pm Mon-Fri Apr-Nov, 9am-5pm Mon-Fri Dec-Mar) is a two-floor former banker's home

from 1861 with a set-up sitting room upstairs and photos from the glory days.

Across the southern gorge from the centre is the huge, impressive **Asenevs Monument**, paying tribute to four kings.

Activities

Trapezitsa (☎ 635 823; www.trapezitsa1902.com; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Fri) arranges rock-climbing and hiking trips.

Gorgona (☎ 601 400; www.gorgona-shop.com; ul Zelenka 2; rental per day 10lv; ☎ 10am-1pm & 2-7pm Mon-Fri, 10am-2pm Sat) rents mountain bikes.

Courses

Sts Cyril & Methodius University (☎ 639 869; www.cet-vtu.com; ul Teodosii Tarnovski 2) offers Bulgarian-language classes in August for €550 (including room and board) and private tutors (9lv per hour).

Sleeping

Touts offering private rooms (around 15lv per person) usually wait for buses and trains at the stations.

HOSTELS

Low Costel Hostel (☎ 088-572 6733; ul Assen Ruskov 6; dm incl breakfast 16lv; ☎) Nearly open during research time, this simple, three-dorm British-run hostel is closest to the stations.

Hikers Hostel (☎ 0889-691 661; www.hikers-hostel.org; ul Rezevoarska 91; dm/r incl breakfast €10/26; ☎) Up, way up, a cobbled path, this nice, smallish hostel is a hike to reach but has superb views. The two-tiered front deck sets up 'camp' spots at peak time. Reserve ahead for (crucial) pick-up.

Hostel Mostel (☎ 0897-859 359; www.hostelmostel.com; ul Jordan Indjeto 10; dm incl breakfast; ☎) Sofia's Mostel folks were looking to set up a big-house hostel three minutes from the Citadel entrance when we visited. Pluses include a barbecue area, huge balcony and big sitting area inside.

HOTELS

Hotel Trapezitsa (☎ 635 823; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; dm 15-20lv, s/d/apt 30/40/55lv) This cheap central hotel has 30 rooms. It's slightly old (with manifesto-brown carpet) but attracts youthful guests. Definitely make sure you have a room at the back – they have ridiculously great gorge views.

Hotel Etar (☎ 621 838; www.etar.veliko.info; ul Ivailo 2; s/d incl breakfast 40/60lv, with air con 60/80lv; ☎) This

old commie-era tower hotel has clean but stuffy rooms.

Eating & Drinking

Ourpick Shtastlivetsa (☎ 600 656; ul Stefan Stambolov 79; mains 5-11lv; ☎ 10am-11pm) Long Veliko's most popular (and best) eating place, this gorge-view spot has separate menus for Bulgarian and Italian dishes. There are nine 'diet pizzas' made of rye flour, plus 82 salads.

Pepy's Bar (ul Veneta Boteva 5; ☎ 8am-11pm) A laid-back, softly lit bar with mixed ages, a grab-bag décor (Jackie O photos, Bulgarian 78s) and an emphasis on chatting, not loud music.

Getting There & Away

Generally, buses en route to Sofia (9lv to 13lv, three hours) and Varna (9lv to 13lv, three hours) stop at **Yug Bus Terminal** (ul Hristo Botev). Some buses stop at the more convenient **Etap Address** (☎ 630 564; Hotel Etar).

The quiet public **Zapad Bus Terminal** (☎ 640 908), 4km west of the centre, sends eight daily buses to Ruse (6lv, two hours), three to Plovdiv (12lv, four hours), four to Kazanlık (6lv, two hours) and four to Burgas (12lv, four hours).

TRAIN

Veliko's small **train station** (☎ 620 065) sends about six daily trains to Ruse (4.30lv, 2½ to 3½ hours) and eight to Tryavna (2.90lv, one hour). A much busier station is just 8.5km north at Gorna Oryahovitsa, a stop on the Sofia-Varna line. From there, trains go to Bucharest (25/41lv seat/sleeper, two daily) and Istanbul (35/62lv, one daily). Minibuses along ul Vasil Levski, or bus 10 east from the centre, head there every 10 or 15 minutes (11lv).

Buy international tickets at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 622 2042; ul Tsar Kolyan; ☎ 8am-noon & 1-4.30pm Mon-Fri).

AROUND VELIKO TÂRNOVO

Arbanasi Арбанаси

☎ 062 / pop 1500

Five kilometres from Veliko Târnovo, high-on-a-hill Arbanasi has stacks of old walled villas and taverns, plus outdoor cafés good for spending a beer-soaked afternoon.

The 16th-century **Nativity Church** (adult/student 4/2lv, guide 8lv; ☎ 9am-6pm Apr-Oct, 9am-5pm Nov-Mar), 200m west of the bus stop, was built hohum and low to disguise its purpose from the

Ottomans. Inside, it bursts with colourful murals depicting 2000 scenes.

It's about 3lv or 4lv to reach Arbanasi by taxi from Veliko. Some Gorna Oryahovitsa-bound minibuses from ul Vasil Levski in Veliko stop in Arbanasi.

Tryavna Трявна

☎ 0677 / pop 12,200

As Bulgaria's ever-whittling woodcarving capital – with an old town centre, several museums as well as a church, plus revival-era shopfronts – Tryavna (39km south of Veliko) offers as much as Arbanasi without so many tourists.

The **tourist office** (☎ 2247; www.tryavna.bg; ul Angel Kanchev 22; ☎ 9am–5pm Mon–Fri), 400m south of the train and bus stations, was under renovation at last pass, but in the past has rented camping gear.

Trevnenski Kât (☎ 2033; ul Kanchev 8; s/d from 30/40lv) is a classic 19th-century tavern style guesthouse on the main square with a buzzing *mekhana* (festive tavern restaurants) downstairs.

Tryavna has half-hourly bus connections with Gabrovo (13km west). Nine daily trains go to/from Veliko Târnovo (2.90lv, one hour).

BLACK SEA COAST

Go quick. Western Europeans with extra euros or pounds are buying up space on the golden-sand beaches. The hotels and condos of the main resort, Sunny Beach, can fit 100,000, while its beach only has room for 30,000! Still, there are some quieter pockets north of Varna and south of Burgas.

Most hotel prices raise their rates in June and again in July and August, then drop them a bit in September.

VARNA ΒΑΡΝΑ

☎ 052 / pop 312,000

Varna was founded as Odessos by Greek sailors in the 6th century BC. Even without the Black Sea at its lip it would be a Bulgarian highlight, with Roman ruins, guys in sailor caps, and a super museum. There are easy jaunts north and south to beaches, and not bad ones in town.

The renowned **Varna Summer International Festival** is held between May and October.

Orientation

The train station is 650m south of central pl Nezavisimost, where pedestrian mall ul Knyaz Boris I heads west to ul Slivnitsa, which goes southeast to seaside Primorski Park. The bus station is 2km north of the centre; take bus 409 or 148.

Information

Bulbank (ul Slivnitsa; ☎ 8am–6pm Mon–Fri)

Frag (pl Nezavisimost; per hr 1lv; ☎ 24hr) Internet access behind the opera building.

Global Tours (☎ 601 085; www.globaltours-bg.com; ul Knyaz Boris I 67; ☎ 8am–10pm Jun–Sep, 9am–7pm Mon–Fri Oct–May) Excellent travel agency books cars (from €16 per day) and private accommodation (from €20) and offers guided day trips to Kaliakra Cape.

International Phone Booths (ul Batenberg 44; calls per min 0.23lv; ☎ 9am–10pm)

Left Luggage (main bus terminal, bul Vladislav Varenchik; per day 4lv; ☎ 7am–10pm)

Municipal Tourist Information Centre (ul Batenberg; ☎ approx 10am–6pm Mon–Fri)

Peralnya (ul Voden; per load 4.60lv; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Sat) Laundry service.

Regional Tourist Information Centre (☎ 602 907; tourism@tourexpo.bg; bul Tsar Osvoboditel 36; ☎ 9am–7pm Mon–Fri, 9am–1pm Sat)

Sights

The large **Archeological Museum** (☎ 681 030; ul Maria Luisa 41; adult/student 5/2lv; ☎ 10am–5pm Tue–Sun Apr–Sep, 10am–5pm Tue–Sat Oct–Mar) is one of Bulgaria's best. Housed in a former girls' school – a grand old two storey – it is filled with more than 100,000 pieces from some 6000 years of the area's history, all well explained in English. Look out for the sculpted Thracian goatee.

The 8km-long **Primorski Park** is a leafy strolling ground freckled with museums, a kids' amusement park and heroic statues. It's here, in summer, that open-air clubs dominate the night, and the **beaches** see Speedo and bikini action.

The leftovers of the 2nd-century AD **Roman Thermae** (ul Khan Krum & San Stefano; adult/student 3/2lv; ☎ 10am–5pm May–Oct, 10am–5pm Tue–Sat Nov–Apr), about 400m southeast of pl Nezavisimost, comprise the largest ruins in the whole country.

The mammoth onion-domed **Cathedral of the Assumption of the Virgin** (pl Mitropolitska Simeon; admission free; ☎ 7.30am–7pm summer, 7.30am–5.30pm winter) is 200m northwest of pl Nezavisimost.

Sleeping

HOSTELS & CAMPSITES

Gregory's Backpackers (☎ 379 909; www.hostelvarna.com; 82 Fenix St, Zvezditsa; dm incl breakfast €10; ☎ Apr–Oct; ☎) Run by a young British couple, Gregory's is a great kick-back hostel base, but it's 15 minutes outside of town in a small village. Staff offer daily rides to town (and pick-up from the station). There's plenty to justify the location: TV with DVD library, wading pool and a bar.

Flag Hostel (☎ 089-656 4679; flagvarna@yahoo.com; ul Sheinovo 2, 2nd fl; dm/r €8/25) This new location/management of the Black Sea's first hostel (with four dorm rooms near the centre) opened up after our last visit.

Campers can venture about 20km south of Varna at the delta of the Kamchea River to **Kamchea**. There's a beach, plus cheap bungalows to rent and spots to pitch tents. It's 3km from the highway.

HOMESTAYS

Across from the train station, **Victorina** (☎ 603 541; http://victorina.borsabg.com; Tsar Simeon 36; s/d with family 22/30lv, s/d in private apt 30/40lv; ☎ 7am–9pm Jun–Sep, 10am–6pm Mon–Fri Oct–May) arranges rooms all year. The bus and train stations have accommodation bureaux too; note some readers have reported extra '25% charges' with the latter.

HOTELS

Voennomorski Club (☎ 617 965; vmkvarna@varna.net; ul Vladislav Varenchik 2; s/d 31/46lv; ☎) Rooms can be a little musty and staff grumpy.

Hotel Relax 1 & 2 (www.hotelrelax1.com; s/d 35/40lv; ☎); No 1 (☎ 607 847); No 2 (☎ 361 586; ul Stefan Karadzha 22) This oddball complex of two Relaxes is a good cheap bet. No 1 is more modern, No 2 in a century-old house.

Cherno More Hotel (☎ 612 243; www.chernomorebg.com; bul Slivnitsa 33; s/d from 35/40lv, r with air con from 50lv; ☎) This Balkantourist beaut is smack-dab in the centre; all rooms have balconies with ocean views.

SCAMS

Varna has Bulgaria's worst reputation for summer rip-offs, notably pickpockets in the open-air market south of the Assumption of the Virgin. Some readers have reported robberies at the microbus station.

Three Dolphins Hotel (☎ 600 911; three_dolphins@abv.bg; ul Gabrovo 27; s incl breakfast 42–51lv d 50–60lv; ☎) A super 10-room hotel near the train station, with themed rooms. Rates are approximately 10% higher during the peak summer period.

Eating

Trops Káshta (bul Knyaz Boris I 48; dishes 2–3lv; ☎ 8.30am–9pm) This bright pick-and-point chain offers fresh Bulgarian staples. Prices drop by 30% after 8pm.

Happy (ul Preslav 11; dishes from 3lv; ☎ 8am–midnight) Bow your head at this holy site, mortals; here in 1994 Bulgaria's enormously popular 'American' chain (a mix of TGIF's and Hooters) began. It mostly serves Bulgarian grill items.

Drinking

Varna's summer beach bars are legendary in these parts, rattling locals' windows through the night. Locations (and names) tend to change each season. Some, such as **Las Playas**, incorporate the water, with inflatable chairs in the sea.

Getting There & Away

AIR

Varna airport (code VAR; ☎ 650 835) is 10.5km west of town. Bus 409 goes there.

BUS

The **main bus terminal** (☎ 433 162; bul Vladislav Varenchik) operates bus services to the following destinations: Athens (137lv, 26 hours, one weekly), Burgas (8lv, 2½ hours, roughly every 30 or 40 minutes), Istanbul (40lv, 10 hours, three daily), Plovdiv (17lv, six hours, two daily), Ruse (10lv, four hours, four daily) and Sofia (22lv, seven to eight hours, every 45 minutes) via Veliko Târnovo (13lv, four hours).

FERRY

London Sky Travel (☎ 601 330; www.lstravel.com.ua; Morska Gara) runs a weekly service to Odesa, Ukraine, from May to September. There's no service to Istanbul.

MICROBUS

The **microbus terminal** (Avtogara Mladost; ☎ 500 039; ul Knyaz Cherkazki), 200m west of the bus station, sends buses hourly to Burgas (8lv) and Balchik (4lv), and less often to Nesebâr.

TRAIN

Direct trains from the **train station** (☎ 630 444; bul Primorski) link Varna with Sofia (18.70lv, 7½ to 8½ hours, six daily), Plovdiv (13.70lv, 6½ hours, three daily) and Ruse (8.90lv, four hours, two daily); there are also direct links to Bucharest in summer.

Buy international tickets at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 632 348; ul Preslav 13; ☎ 8am-5.30pm Mon-Fri, 8am-3.30pm Sat), 150m east of the station.

Getting Around

Taxi drivers can be a-holes in Varna. Go with **Chaika Taxi** (☎ 644 444) or **Omega** (☎ 388 888).

NORTHERN COAST

North of Varna are some upmarket beach resorts that focus on rich package-trippers. All can be visited on day trips from Varna.

Get to **Sveti Konstantin** beach, 9km north, by bus 8 from ul Maria Luisa.

Golden Sands (Zlatni Pyasâtsi), 18km north of Varna, has a 4km stretch of beach.

Farther north, **Balchik** faces a rocky shoreline and is a potential base for more rewarding spots to the north. There's a pricey palace to visit in town. The bus stop is 1km above the historic seaside centre, where you'll find a **tourist information centre** (☎ 62 961; ul Primorska). **Esparansa** (☎ 75 148; ul Cherno More 16; s/d with shared bathroom 15/20lv), about 150m up from the port, is a homey four-room guesthouse. The more standard **Balchik Hotel** (☎ 72 809; www.hotel-balchik.com; s/d €15/25) is 400m up from the port.

Buses continue north to the town of Kavarna. Another 10km on is **Kaliakra Nature Reserve** (admission 3lv), a lovely seaside spot that dolphins swim past. About 18km by road is **Kamen Bryag** (Stone Beach), where rope-free rock-climbers tumble safely from cliffs into the Black Sea. Check Varna agencies for trips here.

NESEBÂR НЕСЕБЪР

☎ 0554 / pop 9360

About 35km north of Burgas, historic but touristy Nesebâr sits on a small rocky isthmus on the south end of the wide, practically perfect bay that's home to built-for-tourism **Sunny Beach** (Slânchev Bryag), 2km away. Nesebâr flaunts its centuries, back to when Thracians settled Mesembria here in 3000 BC.

The **tourist information centre** (☎ 42 611; www.nessebarinfo.com, in Bulgarian; ul Messambria 10; ☎ 10am-6pm Mon-Fri) lacked much info when we visited.

Even the church-ed-out should stroll past Nesebâr's Byzantine-inspired, ceramic disc-adorned **churches**, including the ruined 6th-century **basilica** (ul Mitropolitovska).

At the north end of town, **Hotel Toni** (☎ 42 403; ul Kraybrezhna; r 35/40lv; ☎) is a cosy hotel with some balconies facing Sunny Beach.

Hotel Rony (☎ 44 001; ul Chaika 1; s/d incl breakfast summer 49/65lv, winter 34/45; ☎) is a budget hotel just past the town gate.

Not all Varna-Burgas buses along the coast leave the main highway, 2km west of town. Nesebâr-bound buses stop in the new town, 1km west, and (usually) at the old town gate. From the old gate, up to six daily buses (more in summer) head north to Varna (8lv, two hours) and more often to Burgas (3lv, 40 minutes). Buses frequently go to Sunny Beach.

BURGAS БУРГАС

☎ 056 / pop 189,500

This Black Sea gateway is a rather grimy port town with two big-time pedestrian malls and a so-so beach. However, it has frequent transport connections to better beaches nearby. The patient will see its charm.

The pedestrianised ul Aleksandrovska runs north (across ul Bulair) with the train station and Yug Bus Terminal. At pl Svoboda it meets another mall, ul Bogoridi – the busier of the two – which extends east towards the beach.

Bulbank (ul Aleksandrovska; ☎ 8.30am-6pm Mon-Fri) has an ATM. To check email, try **Internet Klub** (cnr ul Slavyanska & Bogoridi; per hr 1lv; ☎ 24hr).

Sights

Burgas' **beach** is a 2km strip with barges passing by. Running alongside the beach is Maritime Park.

If it rains, the best museum is the **Ethnographical Museum** (☎ 842 586; ul Slavyanska 69; adult/student 2/1lv; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri mid-Sep-mid-Jun, 9am-6pm Mon-Fri, 10am-6pm Sat mid-Jun-mid-Sep).

Sleeping

Primorets Travel (☎ 842 727; ul Ivan Vazov; per person 12lv; ☎ 7am-7pm summer, 9.30am-5.30pm Mon-Fri winter) Opposite the train station.

Fotinov Guest House (☎ 579 018; ul Fotinov 22; r 40-45lv; ☎) This comfy 11-room boutique-inspired budget hotel has chic, rust-coloured shagpile carpet and colourful bedspreads.

Hotel Elite (☎ 845 780; ul Morska 35; s/d incl breakfast 45/50lv) In a pleasant location off ul Bogodini, it has nice new rooms, some with balconies.

Eating & Drinking

Along the water are several beach cafés/bars, open in summer.

BMS (ul Aleksandrovska; dishes 1.30-2.40lv; ☎ 8am-10pm) A fluorescently lit, peppy pick-and-point cafeteria with good Bulgarian food.

Maracas (ul Bogoridi 19; mains 3-6lv, desserts 1.89lv; ☎ 7am-midnight) The best sit-and-stare spot on the pedestrian mall is great for desserts and drinks.

Party Club (ul Bogoridi 36; entry free-2lv; ☎ 11am-late) A cavernous basement bar that lights up with original/cover rock bands.

Getting There & Away**AIR**

The airport, north of town, has many charter flights in summer. From June to September, Wizz Air connects Burgas with Budapest (about €90 return) once weekly, and with London (about £180 return) two or three times weekly. Bus 15 (0.50lv, 15 minutes) heads to/from Yug Bus Terminal.

BUS

Most buses and minibuses leave from **Yug Bus Terminal** (☎ 842 692; near ul Aleksandrovska & Bulair). However, Varna-bound buses from central Bulgaria usually drop off Burgas passengers at the **Zapad Bus Terminal** (☎ 831 429), 2km north of the centre. City bus 4 connects the two.

Buses from the Yug terminal connect Burgas with Sofia (17lv to 19lv, six hours, every 30 minutes or hour), Veliko Târnovo (17lv, four hours, two daily) and Plovdiv (14lv to 16lv, four hours, six to nine daily). There are also several buses daily Varna (8lv, 2½ hours, every 30 or 40 minutes) as well as Sozopol (3lv, 40 minutes), and Nesebâr and Sunny Beach (3lv, 50 minutes).

Travel agencies along ul Bulair sell reserved seats for buses. **Enturtrans** (☎ 844 708; ul Bulair 22; ☎ 6.30am-1am) handles domestic trips only. Buses go to Istanbul (35lv, seven hours, five daily) from **Nisikli Turizm** (☎ 841 261; ul Bulair).

CAR

T5 Travel (☎ 845 060; www.tstravel.net; ul Bulair 1; ☎ 9am-6pm Mon-Sat) rules the car-rental business in Burgas; its high rates (starting at €44) justify renting from Varna.

TRAIN

The **train station** (☎ 845 022) sells domestic train tickets. Off-season links include Sofia

(14.30lv, seven to eight hours, six daily) and Plovdiv (10.70lv, four to five hours, three daily). There are usually a couple of extra services in summer.

A train to Bucharest runs in summer only; buy tickets at **Rila Bureau** (☎ 845 242; ☎ 8am-5pm Mon-Fri, 8am-2pm Sat) in the station.

SOZOPOL СОЗОПОЛ

☎ 0550 / pop 4650

Historic Sozopol, with stone-step lanes in a jutting peninsula and two sandy beaches in town, is a good Black Sea base, but it's crowded.

The bus stop, 31km south of Burgas, is roughly between the old town and inland new town (Harmanite).

Sea taxis out to 6.6-sq-km **St John's (Ivan) Island** cost 5lv to 7lv per person for the return trip.

Gradina Camping has bungalows and lots of tent space near the beach, 2km north of town. **Sasha Khristov's Private Rooms** (☎ 0888-759 174; ul Venets 17; r 21lv) offers four rooms with terraces in old town. **Hotel Radik** (☎ 23 706; ul Republikanska 4; r per person 25-30lv; ☎) is up the hill from the bus stop in new town.

Buses and minibuses leave the **bus terminal** (ul Han Krum) for Burgas (3lv, 40 minutes, half-hourly 6am to 9pm) year-round. In summer, buses head south to beach spots Promorsko, Kiten and (usually) Sinemorets.

BULGARIA DIRECTORY**ACCOMMODATION**

Bulgaria's hostel count has grown in recent years, with Sofia, Plovdiv, Veliko Târnovo and Varna represented.

The next cheapest option is safe, clean homestays, found in summer from the bus- and train-station touts, accommodation agencies or by posted '*stai pod naem*' (rooms for rent) signs. Rates go from 10lv to 25lv per person.

REGISTRATION AT HOTELS

A legacy of the communist era, Bulgarian hotels and hostels still 'register' guests with the police – meaning staff fill out multiple-copy forms with your passport details. These days immigration no longer checks for them when leaving Bulgaria, but keep your copies just in case.

Average rates for hotels (which usually have private bathroom, TV and air con) are around 30lv or 35lv for a single, 40lv to 50lv for a double.

'Camping' for most Bulgarians means an area with side-by-side basic bungalows and a couple of spots to pitch a tent.

Up in the mountains there are many *hizhas* of varying condition. Check Bulgaria maps for locations.

ACTIVITIES

The hiking options in Bulgaria's mountains abound (with more than 37,000km of hiking trails in all). Visit Zig Zag (p231) in Sofia for trip info, tips and trail maps.

In winter, Bulgaria's excellent slopes at resorts such as Borovets, Bansko and Pamporovo bring in skiers, many on package trips. Lift tickets at these places run at about 50lv per day (Borovets is actually 20lv cheaper at weekends!), with gear rental available from 20lv. Secondary ski places, including Mt Vitosha (see p234 for more information), are cheaper and popular with Bulgarian students.

There's good rock climbing outside Veliko Târnovo (p239).

DANGERS & ANNOYANCES

Overall, Bulgaria feels a lot safer than some of its neighbours. Pickpocket hot-spots include both Sofia and Varna in summer. Cigarette smoke is another matter – there's no escaping it, despite the recent regulation to set aside at least a *table* for nonsmoking customers.

DISCOUNT CARDS

Students can save 50% or more on admission to most museums, and on air fares at some travel agents.

EMBASSIES & CONSULATES

Embassies & Consulates in Bulgaria

Designated visiting hours for citizens or those seeking visas are listed. New Zealanders can turn to the UK Embassy for assistance or contact their **consulate general** (☎ 210-6874 701; 268 Kifissias Ave) in Athens.

Australia (☎ 02-946 1334; ul Trakia 37) Main office in Athens, call for hours.

Canada (☎ 02-969 9717; ul Moskovska 9)

France (☎ 02-965 1100; www.ambafrance-bg.org, in French; ul Oborishte 27-29)

Germany (☎ 02-918 380; ul Frederic Joliot-Curie 25)

Greece (☎ 02-946 1750; ul San Stefan 33;

☎ 8.30am-4pm Mon-Fri)

Hungary (☎ 02-963 1135; ul 6 Sevtemvri 57; ☎ visas

9am-11am Mon, Wed & Fri)

Ireland (☎ 02-980 0642; bul Stamboliiski 55, fl 4)

Macedonia (☎ 02-701 560; ul Frederic Joliot-Curie 17;

☎ 10am-1pm Mon-Fri)

Netherlands (☎ 02-816 0300; www.netherlands

embassy.bg; ul Oborishte 15; ☎ 10am-noon Mon-Fri)

Poland (☎ 02-987 2610; visa info ☎ 02-981 8545; ul

Han Krum 46; ☎ visas 9am-1pm Mon-Wed & Fri)

Romania (☎ 02-971 2858; bul M Eminesku 4;

☎ visas 3-5pm Tue, 10am-noon Wed & Thu) New

Zealanders can get visas for Romania in one day for €30.

Russia (☎ 02-963 0914; www.bulgaria.mid.ru, in Russian;

bul Dragan Tskankov 28)

Turkey (☎ 02-935 5500; bul Vasil Levski 80; ☎ 9.30am-

1pm Mon-Fri)

UK (☎ 02-933 9222; www.british-embassy.bg; ul

Moskovska 9)

USA (☎ 02-937 5100; www.usembassy.bg; ul Kozyak 16)

Bulgarian Embassies & Consulates Abroad

Australia (☎ 02-9327 7581; fax 02-9327 8067; 4 Carlotta Rd, Double Bay, NSW 2028)

Canada (☎ 1-613-789-3215; fax 1-613-789-3524; 325 Steward St, Ottawa, ON K1N 6K5)

France (☎ 01 45 51 85 90; www.bulgaria.com/embassy/france; 1 Ave Rapp, 75007 Paris)

Germany (☎ 030-201 09 22; bbotscaft@myokay.net; Mauër Strasse 11, Berlin 10117)

Greece Athens (☎ 30-1-647 8106; fax 30-1-647 8130; 33 Stratigou Kallari St, 15452 Paleo Psychico, Athens);

Thessaloniki (☎ 031-829 210; Edmundo Abot 1, Thessaloniki)

Ireland (☎ 0353-1-660 3293; fax 0353-1-660 3915; 22 Burlington Rd, 4 Dublin)

Macedonia (☎ 03-8991-229 444; fax 03-8991-116 139; 3 Zlatko Shnaider St, Skopje 1000)

Netherlands (☎ 031-70-350 3051; Duiinroosweg 9, 2597 KJ The Hague)

Romania (☎ 040-1-230 2150; fax 040-1-230 7654; Str Rabat 5, sec 1, Bucharest)

Serbia (☎ 038-11-64 62 22; fax 038-11-64 10 80; 26 Birchaninova St, Belgrade)

Turkey Ankara (☎ 090-312-426 7455; Atatürk Bulvari 124, Kavaklıdere, Ankara); Istanbul (☎ 090-212-281 0115;

fax 090-212-264 1011; Ahmet Adnan Saygun Caddesi 44, Ulus-Levent 80600)

UK (☎ 020-7584 9400; www.bulgarianembassy.org.uk; 186-88 Queen's Gate, London SW7 5HL)

USA (☎ 1-202-387 0174; www.bulgaria-embassy.org; 1621 22nd St NW, Washington DC 20008)

FESTIVALS & EVENTS

Bulgaria hosts many fascinating shindigs. City-run music and cultural events go all through summer, particularly Varna's music festival.

During **Martenitsa** in March, most Bulgarians wear red-and-white figures made from yarn till they see a stork. A three-day **rose festival** concludes the first Sunday in June in the central town Kazanlak.

GAY & LESBIAN TRAVELLERS

Consensual homosexual sex is legal in Bulgaria. The best source for discos and bars is www.bulgayria.com. **Bulgarian Gay Organization Gemini** (www.bgogemini.org) can help point out places to go, too.

HOLIDAYS

Official public holidays:

New Year's Day 1 January

Liberation Day (National Day) 3 March

Orthodox Easter (One week after Catholic/Protestant

Easter) Sunday and Monday in March/April

St George's Day 6 May

Cyrillic Alphabet Day 24 May

Unification (National Day) 6 September

Bulgarian Independence Day 22 September

National Revival Day 1 November

Christmas 25 and 26 December

INTERNET RESOURCES

Useful sites:

www.bdz.bg Train schedule and fares.

www.centralnaavtogara.bg Sofia-based bus routes.

www.sofiaecho.com English-language paper.

LANGUAGE

Almost everything is written in Cyrillic, a Bulgarian (not Russian) creation. Many Bulgarians know some Russian, German or English. See p2 for a few useful words.

MONEY

The leva (lv) comprises 100 stotinki. It's pegged to the euro (roughly 2lv to €1). Prices in this chapter conform to local prices

(alternating between euro, US dollar and leva). Banknotes come in denominations of one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 *leva* and coins in one, two, five, 10, 20 and 50 stotinki.

ATMs (cash points) are everywhere and compatible with foreign banks.

Foreign-exchange offices are in every city, town and at major attractions. US dollars, UK pounds and the euro are the best currencies to carry.

American Express and Thomas Cook cheques can be cashed at almost all of the banks. Bulbank, the country's official bank, charges 0.2% commission (minimum €1 per transaction).

In January 2006, Bulgaria finally dropped its dual pricing scheme – a communist legacy – where foreigners paid double or more than locals.

POST

Sending a postcard to anywhere outside Bulgaria costs 1.40lv. Many post offices in bigger cities are open daily.

TELEPHONE

At Bulgarian Telecommunications Centre (BTC), often found at main post offices, you can make international calls for about 0.36lv per minute. It's cheaper to call from internet cafés (as little as 0.12lv per minute). Mobika and BulFon telephone booths use *funkarta* (phonecards).

VISAS

Currently citizens of Australia, Canada, Ireland, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Poland, UK and the USA can obtain a free 30-day tourist visa at any Bulgarian border, international airport or seaport. Citizens of other EU countries are able to get a 90-day tourist visas.

The easiest way to get a new visa is by leaving the country and returning the same or next day. It may also be possible to pay for an extension at the crazy immigration office in Sofia (p231).

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