



Bulgaria - The Pirin-Rodopi mountain trek

Introduction:

This tour is a lighter version of the Pirin-Rila trek, which combines the high and challenging Pirin Mountains' beauty with the serenity of the Rodopi Mountains range, the latter known as of the legendary musician Orpheus. During the trek, you will get to explore some of Bulgaria's more remote and forgotten regions. Mountain border villages, which were closed to foreign visitors not so long ago, enable the tourists to experience some elements of authentic Bulgarian culture and country life. On the tour we also visit caves and the second biggest Bulgarian monastery.

Tour highlights:

Pirin Mountains are the second highest in Bulgaria after Rila Mountains and the third in the Balkan Peninsula (Mount Vihren 2914 m a.s.l.).

Rodopi Mountains: The Rodopi Mountains (highest peak: Golyam Perelik (2191m a.s.l.) are the oldest mountains on the Balkan Peninsula.

Bansko (925 m a.s.l.) is one of the biggest winter resorts in the country.

Shiroka Luka (1060 m a.s.l.) Numerous houses preserving the typical Rodopean architecture, speech, songs and customs of local people have given the village the status of an architectural, ethnographic and folklore reserve.

Plovdiv (160 m a.s.l.) ranks as the second Bulgarian city in population and size. The old town of Plovdiv is

one of the oldest European towns contemporary to Troy and Mikena.

Yagodina Cave is among the longest caves in Bulgaria (more than 10 000m mapped so far), considered to be one of the most beautiful in Europe with its outstanding stalactites, stalagmites, columns, ponds and cave pearls in them.

The Devil's Throat Cave has its name from the fact that if you let something flow in the cave river it never comes out again. There is a cave waterfall - one of the highest underground waterfalls in Europe, 42 m high.

Bachkovo Monastery is the second largest Bulgarian monastery.

Itinerary:

Day 1. Arrive at Sofia or Plovdiv Airport and transfer to Bansko for overnight accommodation (about 3 hrs).

/dinner/

Day 2. Bansko - Vihren hut – Banderishki Lakes - Bansko

After breakfast we head for the foothills of the Pirin Mountains, above the Vihren hut (1,950 m, 6,397 ft). We reach the latter by bus (a 20-minute ride) and continue on foot to the glacial lakes close to the Bunderitsa River. There we visit the Muratovo, Ribnoto (The Fish), Dulgototo (The Long), Zhabeshkoto (The Frog) and Okoto (The Eye) lakes. The superb view to the neighbouring peaks (most of them higher than 2,500 m, 8,202 ft) is complemented by the aroma of mountain herbs and the cries of Nutcrackers and Ring Ouzels. This walk will take about 3-5 hours depending on the weather conditions. After that we go back to

Bansko by bus, with a short stop to the oldest tree in Bulgaria (more than 1,300 years old!). Later in the afternoon we will embark on a short sightseeing trip along the streets of Bansko, visiting the Holy Trinity church, some traditional crafts shops and enjoying the unique architecture of the houses there.

Walking time: 5hrs ; Uphill walk: 300 m (984 ft); downhill walk: 300 m (984 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 3. Bansko – Dobrinishte – Mount Polezhan – Leshten - Kovachevitsa

In the morning we have a transfer to the foothills of the Pirin Mountains, but this time to Dobrinishte (a 15 minute drive). Dobrinishte is a balneological resort, east of Bansko, famous for its mineral springs since ancient times. From there the bus travels on to the Gotse Delchev hut (about 20 min drive; 1,450 m, 4,757 ft). Here we take the chairlift to the Bezbog hut (2,236 m, 7,335 ft.) - the start of today's trek, which is a 30 minute ride. The target of the day is Mount Polezhan (2,851 m, or 9,353 ft).

There are incredible views on the way to the top and from the summit itself. One can count 17 glacial lakes from a single point, including the biggest lake in Pirin – Popovo Lake. These are probably the most beautiful panoramic views available from these mountains. It takes approximately 5 hrs to complete the walk. We return to the Gotse Delchev hut via the same lift. Our next meeting with traditional Bulgarian architecture will take place in Leshten village and further to the village of Kovachevitsa (1,050 m, or 3,444 ft) (some 70 km (43 miles) from Dobrinishte). The overnight

in Kovachevitsa will be preceded by a short walk along the paved streets and the stony walls of the ancient houses of both villages.

Walking time: 6hrs; Uphill walk: 650 m (2,132 ft); downhill walk: 650 m (2,132 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 4. Kovachevitsa – Dospat Dam – Trigrad

After breakfast we make a short stroll to the chapel of St. George above Kovachevitsa. The return hike takes about 2-3 hrs. Walking on Dabrash Ridge we will meet remains of old houses and pens, scattered among meadows, woods and interesting rock formations. Once reached, the view from the peak is superb, revealing the valley of Mesta River, Slavianka Mountains and the southern slopes of Pirin Mountains. After this, our bus will take us some 90 km (55 miles) further on to Trigrad village (3 hrs drive; 1,250 m, or 4,101 ft) where we stay for the next two nights. We will pause for lunch by the blue waters of the Dospat dam.

Walking time: 5hrs; Uphill walk: 350 m (1,148 ft); downhill walk: 350 m (1,148 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 5. Trigrad – Vodni Pad – Trigrad

In the morning we continue southeast to the peak of the ridge by Trigrad village and then further on to Vodni Pad village. The walk there will take around 3-4 hrs, with the route back along the Trigradska River's stream taking another two. The path is a pleasant one, passing through coniferous woods all the time. After gentle ascent to the summit of the mountains the track follows its highest points, affording views of potato fields and green meadows on the right-hand side. In Vodni Pad we will stop for lunch and a siesta. The return journey is a real delight, tracing the Trigradska River all the way to Trigrad village before continuing on to the Trigrad Gorge (1,450 m, or 4,757 ft) for another 30 minutes. This trek highlights the stark contrast between the 250 m (820 ft) high cliffs of the gorge and the dark, cold and sinister "mouth" of the "Devil's Throat" Cave. A cave tour is optional, but must be performed within its working time (before 4.30 pm).

Walking time: 5hrs; Uphill walk: 400 m (1,312 ft); downhill walk: 450 m (1,476 ft)
/breakfast, dinner/

Day 6. Trigrad – Yagodina – Devin

After breakfast we leave the hotel in Trigrad on foot. A good dirt track, following the upper edge of Trigrad Gorge, leads to the village of Yagodina (850 m, or 2,788 ft). It goes through pine forests, agricultural land (especially popular for traditional potato growing), pastures and meadows. We will reach Yagodina in 2,5 hrs. From the village the track ascends a little into the nearby coniferous woods, before flattening out. Before reaching the Yagodina Cave the path becomes steep, descending all the time to the riverbed of the Vucha River. It takes about an hour hike from Yagodina village to the cave. There a 45-minute cave tour will await us – please be prepared for the temperature inside the cave (6°C). The bus will be waiting by the entrance to the cave, and will transport us to Devin, where we will stay overnight.

Walking time: 3-4hrs; Uphill walk: 250 m (820 ft); downhill walk: 600 m (1,968 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 7. Devin - Shiroka Lyka - Bachkovo Monastery - Plovdiv

This morning we start with a short transfer (3 km) to the picturesque site Struilitsa, where we will walk along the Devin eco-path, offering some fine views of the Valley of Devin River. At noon we continue with a transfer to Shiroka Lyka for short sightseeing and continue on to Bachkovo Monastery - the second largest in Bulgaria. We end up in Plovdiv, where you will have some free time in the late afternoon for sightseeing and shopping. Walking time: 3 hrs; uphill walk: 200 m; downhill walk: 200 m).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 8. Early transfer to Sofia or Plovdiv Airport for departure.

/breakfast/

Accommodation:

We stay in excellent family-run hotels, rooms with private facilities (days 1,2,4,6 & 7), guesthouse in Kovachevitsa (Day 3) rooms with shared facilities. Ordering lunch packs is available in each of the hotels if necessary for the daily walks (at the amount of 5-6 Euro).

Luggage transportation:

Luggage is taken care throughout the whole trip. A small rucksack (35 l) for carrying personal items during the daily walks is necessary. It is possible to skip some of the walks and to take the bus with the luggage instead.

Tour type: GT

Difficulty grade: B

Best period: June – September

Weather:

Temperatures expected for this period are between +10 and +30°C. Temperatures above 2000 m a.s.l. may drop to -5C after the end of August. Rainfalls or short but heavy showers are possible, being a bit prolonged during spring and late autumn.

Equipment and clothing:

Necessary items: daypack (35 l); 3-season walking waterproof boots with suitable ankle support; waterproof outer shell garment (breathable if possible!); sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion; bottle of water. For the full list with recommended items see "General".

Vaccination:

Optional. See "General" for more information.

Group size: Min. 4 persons

The price includes: accommodation and boarding as mentioned above; transfer to/from Sofia or Plovdiv airports; English-speaking guide and private transfers throughout the tour; entrance fees for the caves and the lifts; VAT and all local taxes.

The price does not include: maps (could be requested in advance when booking the tour), lunches/lunch packs, tips, alcohol drinks, cigarettes and other personal expenses.

GENERAL

TOUR TYPES & GRADES

We provide different varieties of tours as regards to their types and difficulty grades!

Whether you will choose individual and group tours with a guide or combined tours with a guide for some part of the trip depends on you. We emphasize on using local experienced guides with knowledge of the local language, culture, history, art, etc. The tours are conducted in the English language. Guides in other languages are available upon request.

Tour types

Our tours are divided in different tour types, regardless of being guided or not or if someone travels alone or in a group. We have prepared your vacation so that you can concentrate on new impressions and experiences, awaiting you all the time. Here is a description of the various tours:

GT: Group tours

There is a guide accompanying you throughout the whole trip, meeting you at the airport upon arrival and leaving you at the airport again for departure. We use well-trained and experienced local people with good knowledge of English. The group size is normally 6-12 people, if not specially mentioned.

Difficulty grades

To prepare yourself for the best of your vacation we recommend that you start planning it in an advance. Good physical condition is required. In order to achieve it we advise you to start walking, jogging or cycling everyday. Swimming a couple of times a week is also highly recommended. You do not need much to get yourself in shape. And don't forget that the most important tip for an unforgettable active holiday is to choose a trip which corresponds to your physical condition!

B: Moderate

Most of you, who are used to walking during a long weekend, will be in condition to cope with a tour of this level. You should be in good health condition and not too bad physical condition. We have successive days of longer and more difficult walking and days of lighter walking. Some parts of the day routes are done at a higher altitude. The paths are in good condition. We walk for 5-7h a day. You are free to skip some walks and have a rest.

C: Difficult

These tours include trekking which is a little harder, normally on a challenging terrain. We take it for granted that you are in good condition and fit. You should be physically prepared at home to get the maximum of the tour. Most of the trekking is done at a greater height (max 3000 m).

As on other tours you are free to skip some treks and have a rest.

D: Challenging

Tours of this level demand that you be really in good shape. The paths are not always in the best condition and the marking can be scarce. There are day-treks with big ascents and descents. Changing weather conditions /even in midsummer/ play an important role when trekking at a very high altitude and may cause changes of the preliminary route. This is to be decided by the mountain guide on the spot. Normally, the treks are 6-8h per day, but some can be longer. Preliminary trekking experience is an advantage, but not necessary if you are really in good shape. Note that during some of the days, you should personally carry your baggage, which is naturally an additional difficulty.

Extensions: Yes, Black Sea

This is a unique proposal, which gives you the opportunity to stay in Bulgaria for one week more at the incredibly low price! We can offer a great variety of means of accommodation - from home stays (no meals) to 2, 3 and 4-star hotels (BB or HB) on the Southern Bulgarian Black Sea Coast:

- Sunny Beach - a big modern resort with hundreds of hotels, cafes, pubs, casinos, water-sports facilities etc.

- Sozopol, Nessebar - small towns (founded by the ancient Greeks) with picturesque old quarters and a specific atmosphere.

- Lozenets - a peaceful small village with a beautiful beach. Only 4-5 km from the forests of the Strandzha Mountains where you can go walking, biking or riding horses.

Equipment and clothing:

You should always remember that you must try to keep the weight of your hiking equipment down to a minimum. Your packed daypack should weigh no more than 10-15 kilograms.

Recommended items: waterproof rucksack (60 l) & daypack (35 l); walking waterproof boots with suitable ankle support; light casual shoes/sandals for walking and/or for travelling; gaiters; loose, casual trousers for trekking; waterproof trousers; fleece windstopper jacket; windproof, waterproof outer shell garment (breathable if possible!); hat for sun protection; sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion and lip balm; water bottle; torch (headlamp); mobile phone; underwear (not cotton); mosquito repellent; trekking sticks.

Vaccination:

Tick-borne encephalitis, Marseille fever and Crimea haemorrhagic fever is recommended by some medical sources

if travelling in certain areas of Eastern Europe, at specific times of the year. Check latest requirements with your travel clinic or doctor prior to departure.

Money and personal expenses

You will need some extra money to cover meals, drinks and extra trips not included in the tour price. Additional money for souvenirs and personal things could also be spent. That is why it is always necessary to have Bulgarian money in cash. The payments in Bulgaria are usually made in "LEV" (BGN), which is the official currency. The exchange rate with EU and USD is quite changing sometimes, but approximately it is: BGN:EU - 2:1; BGN:USD - 1,6-1. Credit Cards could be used primarily in some supermarkets and restaurants in the biggest cities as well as in the petrol stations. Usually it is marked on their front doors if Credit Cards are accepted. ATMs ("bankomates") are more frequent (again in the biggest towns only!). Traveler's cheques take quite a lot of time to handle and not each bank deals with them (in many cases it takes even few days since their deposition in the bank!) - thus they are not recommended!

Here are some examples of comparative costs in Bulgaria (NB: prices in mid-range restaurants!):

- Coffee – 0,3 Euro
- Tea – 0,3 Euro
- Beer (0,5 l) – 0,5-1 Euro
- Soft drink (0,5 l) - 0,4-0,5 Euro
- Bottle of water (0,5 l) - 0,3-0,4 Euro
- Bottle of mark red wine (0,75 l) - 5-10 Euro
- Three-course lunch - 4-10 Euro
- Lunch pack - 2-3 Euro

Cell phone coverage

Currently the whole territory of Bulgaria is covered with a mobile connection. However the trekking & cycling tours are done in mountainous areas where the signal could be weak or even lacking from time to time. In such a situation you just need to change your location a bit in order to find available network.

Electricity

In Bulgaria two-pin sockets are normal. Voltage is 220 watts. If you come from the U.S. or UK you need to purchase an adapter, which is available only in Bulgarian cities and biggest winter and sea resorts.

Brief about Bulgaria

Territory - 110 912 sq. km.
Population - 7 538 000 (2003) (83,9

% ethnic Bulgarians; 9,4% Turks; 4,7% Roma; rest – smaller minorities Russians, Armenians, Vlachs, Jews, Karakachans etc.)

Religion – 82,6% Orthodox, 12,2% Islam, 0,7% Protestant, 0,5% Catholics, 4,1% Others.

Capital city - Sofia (1 377 531 people in 2006)

Biggest towns - Plovdiv, Varna, Bourgas, Rouse, Stara Zagora, Veliko Tarnovo, Pleven

Mountains - 37 (biggest - Balkan

Mountain: length - ~ 550 km.; width ~ 30-60 km.); (highest - Rila Mountain - peak Musala - 2 925 m.a.s.l.)

Boundaries - North - Romania; East - Black Sea (coastline 378 km.); West - Serbia, Macedonia; South - Greece, Turkey;

Distribution of the lands - 0 - 400 m.a.s.l. - 59,8 %; 400 - 1000 m.a.s.l. - 27,6 %; 1000 - 2000 m.a.s.l. - 11,9 %; over 2000 m.a.s.l. - 0,7 %

Protected areas - 3 national parks, 10 nature parks, 55 reserves, 35 managed reserves, over 350 protected areas and 500 natural monuments

Weather

Mean year temperature - + 10,5 °C (Abs. Min. - -38,3 °C ; Abs. Max. - + 45,2 °C)

Mean rainfall per year - 416 - 650 mm. in the lowlands; 650 - 1193 mm. in the highlands

Rainy days per month – May – 7; June – 8; July – 6; August – 3; September – 6; (number may be higher in the mountains)

Mean daily/night temperatures (up to 1000 m a.s.l.) - May + 22/12 °C; June + 26/16 °C; July + 28/17 °C; August + 26/15 °C; September + 23/13 °C;

Altitudinal distribution of annual temperatures in Bulgaria

