



Bulgaria - Winter birdwatching tour

Introduction:

The wetlands along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast are traditional hot spots for birding at this time of year. Spectacular variety and numerous flocks of waterfowl may be seen in the larger lakes or in the shallow coastal lagoons by the coast. These easily accessible sites of international importance house approximately 50-70 percent of the world's wintering Red-breasted Geese population. Globally-threatened species like Pygmy Cormorants, Dalmatian Pelicans and White-headed Ducks should also make an appearance. The sighting of Lesser White-fronted Geese – one of the most endangered species on the Earth – is a matter of luck. The rest of the list comprises many other water-connected birds (such as grebes, herons, egrets, swans, dabbling and diving ducks, waders and gulls), numbering several hundred-thousand in total. A spectacular quantity of high quality, unforgettable viewing – recommended for a genuine birdwatcher!

Special highlights:

Atanasaovsko Lake is a shallow hyperhaline lake which lies on Via Pontica migratory route and this is the reason why the species variety (with more than 300 species recorded so far) and astonishing numbers of birds attract birdwatchers, photographers and scientists from all over the world especially during migration. This is one of the places in Europe with more frequent observations of Slender-billed Curlew.

Dourankoulak Lake is situated in the north-eastern parts of the country. Dourankoulak Lake is one of the most significant wetlands along the Bulgarian

Black Sea Coast. The fresh waters of the lake, the extensive reedbeds along the shore and the location of the wetland on the Via Pontica migratory route are some of the important details, supporting an impressive avian richness throughout the whole year.

Shabla Lake is a coastal fresh-water lake in North-Eastern Bulgaria, surrounded by areas under cultivation to the west and south. Part of the complex is also the shallow lagoon, named Shablenska Tuzla, placed southwards. The rich in fish waters and the large reedbeds of Shabla Lake along with the mosaic vegetation of the sandy dunes nearby are a premise for the presence of many water-connected birds all year round.

Mandra Lake is the southernmost of the three lakes around Burgas. Previously a brackish lake it became a fresh water reservoir fed from few bigger rivers and a number of rivulets. Recently it has become a part of the complex Mandra-Poda, comprising the territory of the lake and the adjacent small lagoon named Poda.

Itinerary:

Day 1. Arrival at Sofia or Plovdiv airport. Overnight travel by the town of Balchik on the northern Black Sea Coast (either by private transfer or by sleeper train; depending on the arrival time and location of the participants)(total transfer time about 8-10 hrs).

/dinner/

Day 2. In the morning we will attempt to locate some Red-breasted Geese foraging in the coastal fields. The rest of the day will be spent by the lakes around the town of Shabla, rich in waterfowl and

particularly famous for being the winter habitat of tens of thousands of White-fronted and Red-breasted Geese (as well as the Great Egret, Rough-legged Buzzard, Black-necked Grebe, Yellow-legged and Pallas's Gulls, Pochard, Red-crested Pochard and Red-breasted Merganser). We stay overnight either in Balchik or in the visitors centre on the banks of Dourankoulak Lake for the next 2 nights (total transfer time about 2 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 3. Early in the morning we will have the chance to enjoy numerous flocks of geese taking off from Dourankoulak Lake – an amazing view, attracting birdwatchers from all over Europe (we have to get up at around 06.00 a.m.). After that, we will visit the wetlands around Shabla once again. The previous day's species count will be extended by many other interesting birds – primarily waterfowl and waders (including the White-tailed Eagle, Pygmy Cormorants, Bewick's Swans, Tufted Ducks, Smews, Goldeneyes, Bitterns, Sanderlings and Knots) (total transfer time about 2 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 4. In the morning we head for Cape Kaliakra – famous for its steppe nesting species. However its winter inhabitants are often quite interesting too (including European Shag, Black-throated Diver). At around noon we head towards our next major stop – the southern Black Sea coast and the city of Bourgas. We spend three nights by Bourgas. Time-permitting, we will include a stroll around some nearby lakes (total transfer time about 4 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 5. After breakfast we take a trip to the shallow coastal salt lagoons of Atanasovsko and Pomorijsko lakes. These are renowned as some of the best places for watching soaring migrants during passage, but now they provide a safe place for feeding and rest to many other species of birds (including Dalmatian Pelicans, Pygmy Cormorants, Bitterns, Great Egrets, Black-necked Grebe, Whooper and Bewick's Swans, White-headed Ducks, Shelducks, White-tailed Eagles, Pallas's Gulls and plenty of waders and waterfowl)(total transfer time about 2 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 6. In the morning we visit the Poda Lagoon, Mandra and Burgas lakes, just a few minutes' drive from Bourgas (boasting Pygmy Cormorants, Great Egrets, White-headed Ducks, White-tailed Eagles, Bewick's Swans and a great variety of other waterfowl). With their avian richness, these protected sites – close to one of Bulgaria's biggest coastal cities – are a good example of tolerance between mankind and wildlife (total transfer time about 2 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 7. Today we begin our return journey. The city of Plovdiv is our next overnight stop. The biggest night roost of Pygmy Cormorant in Bulgaria (numbering between 2,000 and 4,000 birds) will be on the agenda that evening. The afternoon could be spent at leisure for sightseeing/shopping in the old quarters of Plovdiv before dinner (total transfer time about 3 hrs).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 8. Transfer to Sofia (2 hrs drive) or Plovdiv airport (0,30 h drive) for departure.

/breakfast/

Best period: January-February

Tour type: GT/IG

Difficulty grade:

No special physical condition required. 2-4 km per day walking along dirty roads and flat paths.

Weather:

Temperatures expected during winter vary from +10 to -15°C (usually from -5 to +5°C). Heavy snowfalls or cold spells, fogs and wind storms (especially along the Black Sea Coast) could be unexpectedly variegated by hot spring-like weather. Be prepared for the cold and windy early morning walks for watching the geese taking off.

Accommodation:

We stay overnight in 3-star hotels (days 2, 3) 4, 5, 6) and in a guesthouse (days 2, 3) & 7) with en-suite facilities on HB (breakfast and dinner included). Ordering lunchpacks is also possible.

Equipment and clothing:

Luggage transportation is taken care throughout the whole journey. However a small rucksack with personal things is quite useful during the daily trips. For full list of recommended items see "General".

Group size: Min. 2 persons

The price includes: accommodation and boarding as mentioned above; transfer to/from Sofia or Plovdiv airport; English-speaking guide; luggage and private transfers as mentioned above; entrance fees for Cape Kaliakra and Poda lagoon; VAT and all local taxes.

The price does not include: flights, maps (could be requested in advance when booking the tour); tips; alcohol drinks; other entrance fees; other meals (lunches/lunchpacks); cigarettes and other personal expenses.

GENERAL

TOUR TYPES

We provide different varieties of tours as regards to their types! 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. **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. **IG: International group tours**

The tours are similar to our group tours. The only difference is that these are multi-national. Guided services are in the English language, if no special arrangements have been ordered.

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.

- Nessebar, Sozopol - 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 clothing equipment down to a minimum. Your packed rucksack should weigh no more than 10-15 kilograms.

Recommended items: waterproof rucksack (60 l) & daypack (35 l); walking waterproof boots with suitable ankle support; sandals; light casual shoes 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, Marselle 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 - 1,7-1. 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 - 4-7 Euro

- Lunch pack - 2-3 Euro

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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.

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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.

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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.)
Relligion – 82,6% Orthodox, 12,2% Islam, 0,7% Protestant, 0,5% Catholics, 4,1% Others.
Capital city - Sofia (1 377 531 people in 2006)
Bigest 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

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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