

“BULGARIA – A PIECE OF HEAVEN”



GREETINGS:

Emerson once said: “He had several lives to live, and this is the only one.”

I was “Born to Travel” and in this “the only” life to live, traveling to foreign countries and absorbing their history, culture and famous sights has been a rewarding experience for me.

Now, after years of travel to Communist countries I begin “second reruns” to Eastern Europe. These countries, when I visited them were formerly under the yoke of the Soviet Union. To me, one of the thrilling moments of the fall of Communism is roaming through lands that once were tightly controlled by the Russians.

Bulgaria seldom popped up as an ideal holiday destination in 1999 when I first visited the country. Now Bulgaria is the place to go. In many ways Bulgaria is one of the success stories of the Balkans.

Why travel to Bulgaria? Ancient Thracian, Greek, Roman, and Byzantine civilizations left their marks

on the country’s cultural heritage. All these multiple cultures appear in the country’s arts, in its ancient ruins and architecture. It is a stronghold of Slavic traditions and language. It is a blend of the oldest and newest periods.

UNESCO lists SEVEN landmarks in the country on its World Cultural Heritage list. UNESCO and the European Union pour money into renovating historic sites crumbling under years of neglect. They consider these locations to be of outstanding cultural and national heritage.

Listed as Heritage sites are the Thracian Kazan Tomb, the Sveshtart Tomb, the Madeira Horseman, and the Ivanova Rock. Others preserved ruins and archaeological sites include one of the oldest towns in Europe, **Old Nessebur** and the **Streburn Monastery** set on Rila Mountain.



Bulgaria’s location as a crossroad in Europe has made it the center of many struggles for power. In recent history, Bulgaria had the misfortune of being on the losing side in both World Wars; she aligned herself with Germany. In World War II

again the king aligned the country closely with Germany. He hoped he could recover Bulgaria’s lost territory

Much to the credit of King Boris, Bulgaria did not persecute the Jews. The Bulgarian people blocked the streets to the train stations thus preventing refugee Jews from entering trains to the death camps.

During the Cold War we often referred to Bulgaria as the 16th state of the Soviet Union. Bulgaria has been slower to lift the Iron Curtain’s grim and stogy Eastern Block reputation than the Czech Republic or Slovenia. However, in 1990 they adopted a multi-party system

Bulgarians awoke on January 1, 2007 as citizens of the European Union after a night of fireworks and parties. “We are home!” the Bulgarian newspaper Trued proclaimed in a special New Year’s day edition.



We end our tour in Romania by bus and cross into Bulgaria by way of the Friendship Bridge, high over the swirling water of the Danube.

The towns in Bulgaria are sleepy and European,

filled with horse-driven carts squeaking through narrow cobblestone streets. Men and women tend their gardens and rake in the hay. A very strange clash appears – one of new and old together. Old Baba's and Dyad's (grandparents) walk the street with their goats and then there are young women in designer jeans! Most Bulgarians, in rural Bulgaria, live in big houses. For example, if the house is a 3-story house, the grandparents stay at the bottom; their grown children live on the second floor.

We leave the city of Rouse for the rock-cut monasteries of "St. Michael the Archangel" – on the UNESCO Cultural Heritage list. This is where the first hermits dug out their cells and churches in the 12th century. At one time the cluster of churches included 40 churches. More than 300 monks inhabited the site. The 14th-century murals testify to the exceptional skill of the artists.

Medieval churches and monasteries have always played a great role in preserving Bulgaria's culture and traditions.



The monks took it upon themselves to preserve the beautiful icons, frescoes, and ancient manuscripts. Monasteries such as Rila and Bachkova, each covered with glorious

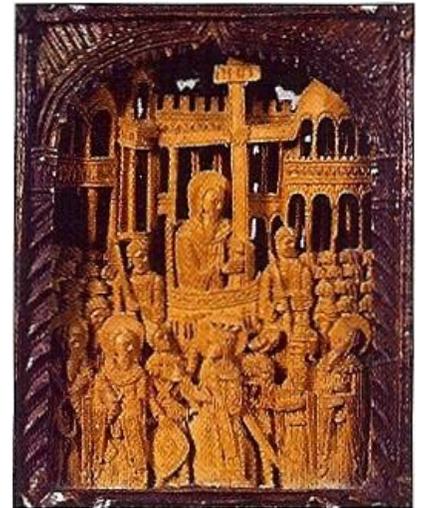
frescoes, preserved Bulgarian culture, traditions and the spiritual heritage of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church during the five centuries of Ottoman rule.

The Rila Monastery, another UNESCO sight, is definitely worth visiting. We look around the beautiful building with its red, white and black designs, exterior frescoes are stunning amid a backdrop of pine and beech covered mountains. We marvel at the details of the **Rafael's Cross** carved with a needle over a period of twelve years. The monk who carved this masterpiece lost his vision after finishing the Cross. The Rila is the country's most holy place for Bulgarians. Stepping into this wooden church transports us back into the early Bulgarian history of the 10th century.



The Bachkova Monastery is about 20 miles south of Plovdiv where it nestles peacefully amid the forest hills. It reminds me of our own Pacific Northwest. I would love to see after a snowstorm. The complex adorned inside and out with frescoes, graphically depicts the torments awaiting sinners. One show a skeletal Death figure armed with his long black scythe.

Monks in black robes and hats and worshippers roam in and out of the monastery's church. They bow and pray and light candles before the well-worn icons and altars. The grounds are lovely with well-tended flowers and trees.



One of over 100 intricately carved scenes on Raphael's Cross

Another wonder of Bulgaria is the Boyana

Only 20 miles from Plovdiv, Bachkovo Monastery, another UNESCO world monument, was founded in the 11th century. The complex is adorned inside and out with frescoes, some recounting the monastery's history, others graphically depicting the torments awaiting sinners. One shows a skeletal Death figure armed with his long black scythe.

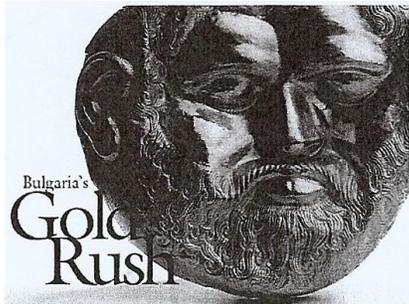
Church built and painted between 11th and 14th centuries. The exquisite frescoes are considered an artistic precursor of the Italian Renaissance period two centuries later.

An authentic Bulgarian meal prepared by real "grannies" dressed in native costumes took place at sunset in a quaint little home.



The women greeted us with warm kisses on both cheeks and huge smiles. For our pleasure, the women then sang many of their native songs in clear beautiful voices. We, in turn, sang some American tunes.

Bulgarian women do not play musical instruments. They usually perform the vocal parts. They often practice singing while weaving and doing household chores. Bulgarian women's local singing consists of many voices and many melodies. We also listened to women's choir in a lovely little church as they rehearsed hymns for the next day's service.



In Bulgaria's gold rush the race is on to uncover the golden splendors of its Thracian past. Archaeologists consider Bulgaria as **El Dorado** – a vast trove of buried treasure where some graves contained gold since at least 4000 BC. The country has

seen a long succession of invaders, traders, settlers and travelers who have left their gold vessels in the royal tombs of the Thracians.

Treasures also include painted vases, bronze sculptures or fragments of murals. Under everything, everywhere there are deep layers of history. Every city, every town in Bulgaria hosts a museum filled with artifacts found right there, not imported from elsewhere. Some remain in their original gravesites; others rest safely in museums.



The Varna Museum of Archaeology is home to the oldest hand crafted gold treasure in the world, dating back to the 5th Millennium BC.

We admire the exceptional rings, earrings and bracelets. We pay special attention to an unique set of a young Thracian woman consisting of a necklace with a bull's head pendant and two earrings –tiny statuettes of the goddess of victory Nike.

These date from the end of the 4th century or the early 3rd.



Our bus bumped along the road through the little village of Sveshtari and into the Sboryabavi Historical Archaeological Reserve. The land is flat, but here and there beehive mounds dot this part of Bulgaria – some rising several stories high. Partially covered by small trees and bushes, we wonder what they were. Were they leftover residues from volcanoes? Did ants or moles build them?

No! These mysterious mounds are the tombs of kings. They contain the archaeological Thracian treasures dating back from about 7000 year ago, through the Bronze and iron ages. This amazing trove of treasures is much more ancient than the gold of the Incas and smaller in size but as old as the Egyptian pyramids.

But, it's not the mounds that are astonishing – it's what they cover! Inside what looks like futuristic glass concrete entrances lay vast troves of buried treasure.

Built of smooth-cut soft limestone blocks, the tomb consists of a passage and three square chambers – a narthex, a side room and a burial chamber. A semi-cylindrical vault covers the tomb. The glass opens to a code and we enter between pillars decorated with freezes of ox heads, rosettes and garland. The bulls represent the male beginning.

Ten 1.2-m high caryatids (sculptured female figures that serve as a support instead of a pillar or column) with raised arms support the walls. They wear long finely plaited sleeveless garments, with a belt under the breasts.



The shape of a flower represents the skirt. Curly hair falls over their shoulders and on the crown sits a basket called **calathos** (made of thirty sheets of gold with rosettes and relief's.) Traces of dark brown paint tinge the hair, faces and clothes. No one really knows for certain what the figures mean. Perhaps they depict Mother Goddesses who represents the continuation of life, revival and bountiful harvests.

There is a wonderful sequel to this adventure. Unknown to us at this time, our guide Lyuba had a surprise for us - a meeting later in Sophia with Dr. Diana Gergova. She is a worldwide author and archaeologist. Dr. Gergova is a specialist in the field of Thracian culture and the head of excavations in Sbornyanova where she led a team of students from all over the world. . She said that the ten figures and decorations in the vault of the tomb are the only ones of

their kind in the former Thracian lands.



Returning to our hotel, we meet a group of young field workers coming home from a day's work in the lavender fields. Never missing a "photo op" we invite the whole group to accompany us back to the field. We laugh with them as we try to communicate them. The girls and boys readily start picking the plants and we happily snap our pictures. It is always fun to meet young folks.

On other occasions, I see the perfect photo op. I catch someone's eye and ask permission to take a photo. The person slowly shakes her head from side to side. Then I remember – head gestures in Bulgaria are the reverse of ours. Their yes is a swivel from left to right. A motion like swatting a fly means she agrees with you. A nod or a shake of the head is a refusal. Even Bulgarians can't explain the origin of these mannerisms.

Now I want to show you the monument of a majestic horseman that has been on the UNESCO World Heritage List since 1979. This relief, dated back to 710 AD, means it was

created during the rule of Bulgar Khan Tervel. It supports the thesis that it is a portrayal of the Khan himself.

We drive through a plain when suddenly there appears a steep wall, which viewed from the west, resembles a petrified waterfall. At a height of 23 meters above the ground stands the Madara Horseman carved on an almost vertical-meter-high cliff. The horseman, facing right, is thrusting a spear into a lion lying at his horse's feet. An eagle is flying in front of the horseman and a dog is running after him. The scene symbolically depicts a military triumph.



In a closer look at the horseman, the dog and the lion, the cropped and critical objects appear separately on the right-hand side of the horse as shown in this picture by Nikola Gruev. Also three partially preserved texts in Medieval Greek surround the image of the rider. These inscriptions reflect the military and political power of the First Bulgarian Empire. This symbol of Bulgarian statesmanship is the only one of its kind in Europe.

It's no surprise to us that globalization has appeared in Bulgaria, Donkey carts

still roll in downtown Sofia, but looking further, we see the 23/7 McDonald's, Levi's, Calvin Klein and other specialty shops.

Today television is westernized. Bulgarians view their own version of "Who Wants To Be A Millionaire." No wonder since the average monthly income is \$200.00 a month. It is possible to turn in CNN and BBC in larger hotels in Sofia.

On a beautiful Sunday we visit the massive, awe-inspiring Alexander Nevski Memorial Church, built between 1882 and 1912 and dedicated to the 200,000 soldiers who died for Bulgaria's independence during the Russian-Turkish War.

The marble entrance with mosaics above the doorway leads into an interior heavy with the sounds of chanting and candelabras afire with blazing lights. Worshippers perform the devotional for the living and the dead. Young people in jeans and old women purchase candles that they light according to ancient custom. They take candles from the floor in memory of the dead; they reach eye-high to commemorate the living.

As we look skyward we see gold-covered domes at the heights of more than 150 feet. They shine on an intricate display of arches and windows. In the church on display are over 300 Orthodox iconic paintings –

some a thousand years old. These paintings are usually made of wood and highly stylized. The dark colors are vibrant.

We travel from Sofia to Plovdiv, Bulgaria's "second city." We visit Old Town first. It is beautiful, with narrow, winding cobblestone streets and colorful 19th-century houses with intricate woodwork. The whole district is small enough to explore on foot.

2000-year old Roman ruins lie around the area. Old Town has been under the protection of the government since 1956. The city is one of the most unusual in Europe. Thracian, Greek, Macedonian, Roman, Slavic, Gypsy, Armenian, Turkish and Bulgarian cultures have all made the town a mixture of architectural styles.

What could be more pleasant than taking a tour of Queen Maria's palace and her garden with such colorful flowers? King Ferdinand of Romania built the villa for his queen in 1924-26.



A granddaughter of Queen Victoria, she spent summers in her palace high on cliffs overlooking the then Romanian northern Black Sea coast.

The garden goes down to the shore, inside a small gulf on the beach.. The area is famous for its mild climate, the fascinating rock formations and warm seawater.

Marie found the palace a refuge for solitude and contemplation and named her home "The Quiet Nest." The queen transformed the rural landscape into a playground for the elite Roman society. It is common knowledge that 60-year-old Marie entertained her 20-year-old Turkish lover in her mansion. The palace became the most-visited resort for painters, artists and writers.



The sight from the cliff is amazing - the Black Sea spread out in front of us and I could see forever and ever. From every window in the palace I could see not only the sea but also stairways going up and down that led to springs, flower beds, statues, cascades of water, thrones and much more.

Visible only from the sea, the 19th century former palace is really quite modest. One does not see a change of guards or any pomp. An enormous chandelier gilded with gold lilies and a royal crown and

gold lily hangs from the ceiling. The Turkish-style bathroom with its sunken bath and multicolored windows is a delight. The palace houses a wine cellar covering two floors underground. Today it still produces 12 varieties of top quality wines and 7 brands of brandy. (I know it is excellent!)

Queen Marie, a follower of the Baha'i teaching, believed in the unity of all of the world's religions and civilizations living altogether. At the same time both should be in harmony with nature. (The palace and Sophia are the only place where Christians and Muslims live in peace.) Nearby a Roman-Arab bathhouse, a minaret of a small mosque, Bulgarian verandas, a Moorish courtyard and a marble throne from Florence grace a part of the garden. A majolica -an earthenware tile- of Our Lady with the infant Jesus stands in a corner.

When I first entered the garden, I saw huge trees, at least a century old.



Bathing in sunlight most of the year, the garden is home to more than 2000 plant species including the large

collection of large-sized cactus in the **“Garden of the Gods.”**

The gardens are a combination of French and English design. The collection of exotic mimosas, magnolias, roses, and lilies arranged in floral compositions is a masterpiece. The **Garden of Roses** contains 80 species of hybrid roses.

Water plays an important place in the palace gardens as several fountains; ponds and canals cool the gardens. A brook passes through it, going down several waterfalls to the Bridge of Sighs. One of the most inspiring and touching Christian symbols is the silver well with a medallion with the Virgin Mary and the infant Jesus cut out. If you see your reflection in its clear water and drop a coin, be assured your wishes will come true!

In another part of the garden are six formal garden terraces. Each represents one of the Queen's children.

Queen Marie loved her castle. After her death, according to her will, Queen Marie's heart rested in a jar for two years in the chapel of her house of dreams. A day after Bulgaria restored its control over the area the heart returned to Romania. We can understand why she lost her heart there; we did, too.

Too soon it becomes time to hold our farewell

dinner and say goodbye to our new and old friends.

Some us have traveled together for some twenty years and have remained good friends. We dine in the Arbanassi Palace, formerly the Bulgarian president's home. A traditional-style mehana (tavern) the roof garden restaurant gives us a spectacular view of the city.



Have I mentioned the special quality of yogurt?

Bulgaria is the home of yogurt is so thick that if one sticks a fork in it, the fork stands up by itself. Other local dishes are: **kebabches**, grilled minced rolls made of veal and spiced with black pepper, paprika and onions; **tatator**, a cold soup made from cucumbers, ground walnuts, sour milk and garlic; **imambayalda** a mixed vegetable dish, to name a few.

Desserts are rich and delicious. The most popular are: **halva**, a mulled cereal, oils and nuts; **lokum**, a soft sticky sweet rolled in sugar; and **baklava**, a very sweet pastry with sugar and walnut filling of Turkish and Arabian origin. The food is too tasty to miss!

A talented dance group performs some Bulgarian folk dances.

The group dances are either in a circle or in a line twisting

usually to the right. Characterized by a variety of movements, steps, twists, and rhythm, the dances leave a strong impression on us.



Most often the steps and movements of Bulgarian folk dances are imitations of the movements people have observed in nature or in everyday events.



These steps are unique, jumps or postures of different animals. The names of dances include **The Bear's horo**, **The Rabbit game**, the **cat's horo** or the **Bug on a blade of grass**.

The world admires Bulgaria for its survival under the most trying times in its history. Bulgaria survived five centuries of Ottomans. The people defied the Nazis; then they endured a long period as a satellite of Russia behind the Iron Curtain.

We now see Bulgarians resuming their place in the democratic culture of Europe. Bulgaria actively takes part in peacekeeping in the Balkans. Bulgaria quickly offered the USA the use of her air force base on the Black Sea on September 9th.

The wonderful archaeological discoveries made during the last few years have shown so many of the roots of European civilization can be found in what now is Bulgaria.



Archaeologists found the world's oldest gold treasurers as well as the famous Thracian gold treasures. Nine out of the 690 **UNESCO** cultural sites exist in Bulgaria.

The main cities have shrugged off their weary Communist image; now they are vibrant and attractive.

I love the Bulgarian spirit; hospitality, the folklore traditions, the rich gold treasures and the beautiful scenery. They are the jewels of Bulgaria.

A famous legend about Bulgaria says that when God gave land to all the nations, He forgot about the Bulgarians. So, not knowing what to do, He broke a piece of Heaven and gave it to them!

"Vseli Praznitzi"

HAPPY HOLIDAYS!

Health, Happiness, Love and, most of all... Peace!

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