

Guaranteed departure dates for 2010: Every day from May to October
(Other dates also possible if the requirement for min group size is fulfilled)

Ref. number-

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Introduction:

The Rodopi Mountains are situated in the oldest part of the Balkans and boast some of the loveliest coniferous woods in the country. The landscape is gentle and rounded, consisting of high ridges and deep river valleys with gorges intermingling with river basins and valleys. Here one can also find 70% of the world minerals, as well as some 600 caves. Flora and fauna contain species that have become extinct in other European countries. In contrast with our tour of the Balkan Mountains, this tour will take you even higher, to around 2,000 m, or 6561 ft. Most of the mileage is done on asphalt main roads, with relatively little traffic, that are well-suited for biking. Along them cyclists can see some old-style means of transportation: wooden carts pulled by horses, donkeys or cows. You may also meet some nomadic gypsies, picking mushrooms and berries in the woods, as well as some local Muslim inhabitants growing tobacco and potatoes, or herds of sheep or goats coming down from the mountain at the end of the day.

Special highlights:

Rodopi Mountains: The Rodopi Mountains (highest peak: Golyam Perelik (2191m a.s.l.) are the oldest mountains on the Balkan Peninsula.
Velingrad (800 m a.s.l.) is the largest Bulgarian spa resort famous for its healing hot mineral waters.
Dospat is a sleepy hill town with a large Pomak (Slav Muslim) population.

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.

Trigrad (1250 m a.s.l.) is a small mountain village picturesquely situated in the central part of the Rodopi Mountains.

Devin (716 m a.s.l.) The town is mostly famous for its mineral springs known from ancient times.

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.

Smolyan (1000 m a.s.l.) is the biggest town around, an administrative center of the region. It is famous for the biggest Planetarium with astronomic observatory on the Balkans and the beautiful natural surrounding including the famous Smolyan lakes.

Cross forest situated near the picturesque village of Borovo it is a holy place with lots of chapels and healing streams, where according legends the holy crucifixion cross has been brought and then buried.

The Wonderful bridges (1450 m a.s.l.) are 2 unique natural rock bridges (about 40 m. high) covering an area of 40,3 hectares.

Bachkovo Monastery is the second largest Bulgarian monastery.

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.

Itinerary:

Day 1. Arrive at Sofia or Plovdiv Airport and spend the night in Sofia or Plovdiv

depending on your arrival time. Please note that the starting point of the trip is between these two cities so you may meet the rest of the group on the morning of Day 2 prior to Stage 1 of the tour.

/dinner/

Day 2. Transfer (1,15hrs) to the starting point of the tour, some 10 km (6.2 miles) away from Kostenets (1,000 m, or 3,280 ft). The road travels deep into Rila Mountains with the first village of Sestrimo appearing on the way. Further up you continue to Belmeken dam through old coniferous woods, before reaching the peak at 2,000 m, or 6561 ft. (the highest point of the whole tour). The last few kilometers are quite steep so you may prefer to travel in the supporting vehicle for this section. After 2 km (1.2 miles) of steep descent, the blue eye of the Belmeken dam will appear. The track then travels around the banks of the dam, offering superb views over the Belmeken waters and the surrounding peaks. The Bulgarian national sports team complex is situated here. Passing through the Yundola Pass meadows (the geographical border between Rila and Rodopi Mountains), a nice descent will take you to the edge of the town of Velingrad (71 km, or 44.1

miles from the start). Some 4 km (2.4 miles) further on and you will reach the hotel (situated at 745 m, or 2,444 ft), where we stay overnight in a hotel with hot mineral water swimming pool. From the beginning of the stage down to the Yundola countryside the traffic is very slow; you may see only a few cars on the way. From Yundola onwards the traffic gets a little heavier. The road condition is good, with only few short sections of potholes. There are two spots on the stage where you can find a restaurant/café or grocery store – the aforementioned complex by the Belmeken dam and in the Yundola countryside.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 76 km (47.2 miles); time: 5,30 hrs; uphill cycling: 500m (1,640 ft); downhill cycling: 1,300 m (4,265 ft)
/breakfast, dinner/

Day 3. Today's cycling begins at the hotel in Velingrad (745 m, or 2,444 ft). You pass through the picturesque landscape of Tsigov Chark countryside (with hotels, holiday huts and restaurants) and then by the Batak dam. Leaving Batak, the road starts rising steeply for the next 10 km, or 6.2 miles, until reaching the highest point of the stage – the countryside around Kartela (1,700 m, or 5,577 ft). From this point on the road descends for most of the way. Some 8 km (4.9 miles) further on, the road passes by the Beglika dam, leading slightly uphill to the wall of the Goliama Beglik dam. Some 45 km (27.9 miles) from the start, you will reach a section where the dam can easily be viewed – and accessed through the forest. It's a good spot for a picnic and siesta in the fresh air. After that the road takes you to another jewel in the Rodopi Mountains – the Shiroka poliana dam – before continuing on to the town of Dospat where we stay overnight (1,200 m, or 3,937 ft).

The traffic on this route is fairly busy for the first 5 km (3.1 miles), before becoming very quiet. The road surface is generally good. There are several places throughout the stage where you can stop for something to eat or drink – Tsigov Chark and Shiroka Poliana dam.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 71 km (44.1 miles); time: 5 hrs; uphill cycling: 600m (1,968 ft); downhill cycling: 700 m (2,296 ft)
/breakfast, dinner/

Day 4. After breakfast the tour resumes in the centre of Dospat (1,200 m, or 3,937 ft), where the track

climbs steeply for the next 2 km (1.2 miles). After a short while, the road begins to descend, before continuing its undulations through pastoral areas, a Roman bridge, spruce woods and potato fields. The first bigger settlement along the road is the town of Borino (16 km, or 9.9 miles, from the start), primarily inhabited by Muslims. This route affords beautiful views over the central parts of the Rodopi Mountains, with the cycling accompanied by a natural phenomenon – the Buynovsko Gorge, which also acts as the gate to our next stop, the Yagodina Cave. Be prepared for the low temperature inside the cave (6° C) during our cave tour, which will take about an hour. Afterwards you can have lunch in the restaurant just opposite the cave, beyond the river. The road now continues to Trigrad village, passing between the 250 m (820 ft) high cliffs of the Trigrad Gorge (1,450 m, or 4,757 ft) Here another sinister cave – The Devil's Throat, housing one of the highest underground waterfalls in Europe – awaits you. A kilometre or so further on you will find the village of Trigrad, where you will stay overnight in a small family hotel (1,200 m, or 3,937 ft). The traffic on this stage remains very light throughout. The road condition is good, bar one section – several kilometers of downhill cycling before the Roman bridge. There are two spots on the stage where you can find a restaurant/café or grocery store – Borino village and the Yagodina Cave.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 50 km (31 miles); time: 4 hrs; uphill cycling: 700 m (2,296 ft); downhill cycling: 800 m (2,624 ft)
/breakfast, dinner/

Day 5. A pleasant descent along Trigradska River brings you to the village of Grohotno and the nature phenomenon "The Elephant" – a 10 m high rock formation. Then the biking continues upstream the Shirokolushka River to the village of Shiroka Luka (1,060 m, or 3,477 ft). We stop here to savour the spirit of this architectural reserve, famous for its preserved houses dating back from the Bulgarian Revival Period and the National folklore school. After lunch we continue biking through the village of Stoykite, heading through some wonderful coniferous forests which offering awesome views of the Rodopi Mountains. Then you reach the Smolyan Lakes region, where the supporting vehicle can either take you on or you can keep cycling to town of Smolyan (1,000 m), where you will stay overnight. Free time for a walk around the town.

Throughout the stage the traffic is fairly light and the road is in fairly good condition. There are two places

throughout the stage where you can find a restaurant/café or grocery store – Shiroka Luka and Stoykite village.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 66 km (41 miles); time: 3.5 hrs; uphill cycling: 950 m (3116 ft); downhill cycling: 800 m (2,624 ft)
/breakfast, dinner/

Day 6. In the morning we set off from the hotel in Smolyan in direction to the historic place Rozhen (1400m) upstream Byala river passing by the small village of Sokolovtsi. We continue climbing up to 1700m and a big picturesque meadow with junction which marks the beginning of a gentle downhill ride in direction to Laki town through "Momina voda" protected area. Nerby is the picturesque village of Borovo and the famous religious place with chapels and healing springs – Krastova Gora (Cross forest) . Overnight in Borovo. Possible extension (8km) to Belitsa natural rock bridge.

Road conditions are good except for some short sections before Laki town. Traffic is very slow and you bike on isolated road. You can have lunch in Laki town or Borovo village. Preparing a lunch box the day before is also an option.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 39 km (24.2 miles); time: around 3,30 hrs; uphill cycling: 700 m (1,312 ft); downhill cycling: 1300 m (4265 ft).

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 7. The downhill ride continues along the picturesque Jugovska River valley to the main road Smolyan-Plovdiv. Short transfer brings you to the Wonderful Bridges rocky phenomenon for short sightseeing. After that you cycle back downhill towards the road to Plovdiv. The next village on the way is the spa centre of Narechenski Bani. After 5 km (3.1 miles) you reach the second largest monastery in Bulgaria – Bachkovo. Here we have lunch and the cycling ends. After this, you travel by car to Plovdiv for overnight.

(80 km (or less depending on the group's mood); uphill cycling: 650m; downhill cycling: 1250m)

The road conditions of the first section are good with very slow traffic. The 16 km (9.9 mile) road from that point to The Wonderful Bridges is very isolated – but offers biking amid lush greenery. The road surface is generally in very good condition. There are many places throughout the stage where you can pause for something to eat or drink – the Wonder Bridges area, Narechenski Bani, petrol stations on the way and so on.

Cycling specifics:

Distance: 80 km (50 miles); time: about 5 hrs; uphill cycling: 100 or 650m (depending on the group's mood); downhill cycling: 1,250 m (4,100 ft)

/breakfast, dinner/

Day 8. After breakfast you will be transferred to Sofia or Plovdiv Airport for departure (transfer time: 20 min to Plovdiv Airport or 2 hrs to Sofia Airport)

/breakfast/**Accommodation:**

We stay in family-run hotels /guesthouses (days 1, 4, 6 and 7) and 3-star hotel (days 2, 3 and 5) with private facilities on halfboard (breakfast & dinner included)

Luggage transportation:

Luggage is taken care of throughout the whole trip.

Additional tour info:

All bikers receive a detailed roadbook and map. The guide with the supporting vehicle and the luggage inside checks several times a day if everything is OK with the group, waiting by crossroads, accompanying them for breakfast, lunch and dinner and giving them talks by the most interesting sites en-route. Bikers can always skip some harder stages using the supporting vehicle.

Tour type: IT + / GT**Difficulty grade: B**

Best period: May – September

Weather:

Temperatures expected for this period are between +10 and +30°C. Sometimes noontime could be a little exhausting for cycling on open territories. Rainfalls or short but heavy showers are possible, being a bit prolonged during spring and late autumn.

Equipment and clothing:

Equipped road or mountain bike are provided by the company. Helmets and saddle bags are provided upon request only. No special equipment needed for this tour (for list with recommended items see "General").

NB! Biking without helmet is not advisable. We strongly recommend you to bring your own helmet or rent one from us.

Bicycles:

For our cycling tours we provide the following high quality bikes:

1. Road bike – Drag Marathon

Touring road bike excellent for long distance cycling on asphalt roads with light aluminum frame and 28" rims. 21 gears, front suspension "Zoom" (30 mm travel), "Shimano" components (shifters, crank, chain, V-brakes), back luggage carrier with double-sided rear panniers

2. Mountain bike - RAM – HT 1

Brand new lightweight hardtail performance mountain bike with aluminum frame suitable for off road biking and asphalt cycling. 24 gears, "Rox shocks Dart 1" front suspension (80 mm travel), "Avid" V-brakes, "Truvativ" crankset, "Sram" shifters and derailleur, "Mavic" 26" rims.

Group size: Min. 2 persons

The price includes: equipped bike (helmets and saddle bags are provided upon request only); English-speaking guide/driver with a supporting vehicle; map; roadbook; transfers from/to Sofia airport; accommodation and boarding as mentioned above; VAT and all local taxes (entrance fees not included).

The price does not include: tips, entrance fees, alcohol drinks, cigarettes and other personal expenses.

30-50 km cycling per day is recommended for some time before the start of the tour.

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:

Recommended items: good quality padded cycling shorts (baggy style); cycling helmet; cycling shoes; fleece headband; fingerless biking gloves; lightweight windproof biking jacket; waterproof trousers; fleece windstopper jacket; sunglasses with UV protection; sunscreen lotion and lip balm.

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

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)

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

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

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:

IT+ Individual tours with a guide

The same as the Individual tours, with the only difference that there is a local guide provided for some of the days. During the days with a local guide most probably you will be together with other tourists.

GT: Group tours

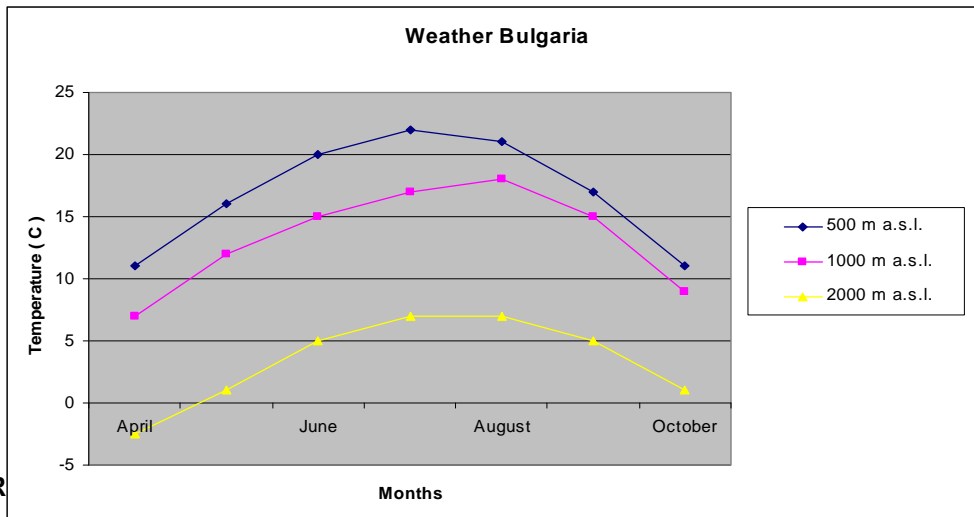
There is a guide accompanying you throughout the whole trip, meeting you at the airport upon arrival and leaving you at the airport again for departure. We use well-trained and experienced local people with good knowledge of English. The group size is normally 6-12 people, if not specially mentioned.

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

3,5-5 hours of cycling per day on average over hilly or flat terrain with only several steep parts (climbing max. 12 %) which can be skipped if it's a guided tour with a supporting vehicle. All people used to cycling should be able to make this trip. However



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