

PAUL KINGSTON-FORD

WHERE NEXT?

A motorhomers guide to
visiting Bulgaria's lost
monuments



www.ourleapoffaith.co.uk

Where next ?

**A motorhomers guide to
Bulgarias lost monuments**

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Acknowledgements

Please note that all the information contained in this guide, was gained from days and days of research before and hours of walking the occasional tarmac pavements during our 2017 visit to the country.

It is not and I don't feel it's ever possible to be a Complete guide, as what we look for in a destination may differ from what you are looking for, but hopefully this highlights some of the attractions and wets your appetite.

We believe that at the time of publishing the information contained was correct, although we except no liability for errors or omissions.

For a more personal view of our travels please check out out :

www.ourleapoffaith.co.uk

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To most of us the word ‘monument’ conjures up images of dry historical figures sitting atop concrete plinths.

Normally for myself monuments are rarely interesting, never mind inspiring.

In communist Bulgaria however, they did things a little differently.

The incredible structures that were built to honour their infamous ideology are truly awe-inspiring architectural works of art.

Modern EU Bulgaria is a far cry from the former member of the Communist block.

Those same monuments, once symbols of the proud achievements of the people, are now symbols of a past and a party that many would rather forget.

As a result these vast numbers lie dormant by road sides, invisible and unloved, nature is slowly reclaiming them.

Like big white elephants in the room, their vast concrete structures are disintegrating before the eyes of anyone who is willing to see !

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THE BASIC STUFF

Currency

Bulgarian Lev (лев in Bulgarian).
100 *stotinki* (стотинки in Bulgarian) = one Lev.

One Lev is almost fixed at just under half a euro,
so we divided by two to get a rough comparison when shopping.

Language

Bulgarian is the only official language, although many younger people speak some English

And everybody understands mime....

Money

Cash is king !

ATMs are widely available. Credit cards are accepted in Petrol stations and restaurants, but corruption has been reported widespread.

Visas

Passport holders of EU member states can stay indefinitely.

Borders

Not part of Schengen zone so passports and vehicle documents are checked at the borders.

Telephone country code

++359

Emergency numbers

112 (EU wide helpline) for Police, Fire and Ambulance

Time zone

Bulgaria is two hours ahead of the UK.

Mobile Phones

Thanks to recent EU roaming changes, your mobile phone should work as normal

MOTORHOME TRAVEL

We use the term Motorhome very loosely we have seen everything from camper vans, American RV converted fire truck to the humble white van. For this guide they are all motorhomes.

What ever you use to travel just enjoy !

Fuel

Unleaded and diesel and LPG were widely available with many fuel stations.

Most stations had signs stating they take Visa and MasterCard cards, but we always paid in cash.

Tolls / Vignette

A vignette is required for the majority of the roads, they are marked with a sign at the side of them and we couldn't see a way across the country without using them. It can be bought at the border if you are in a car, but we were directed to buy ours at a service station – they are on sale in nearly all service stations.

It cost us €15 for a month (you can pay in Euro or Lev), however if you were only planning to drive across the country you can buy a week vignette for €8. Costs went up if your vehicle was over 3.5t.

As we left the country we had to go through a vignette check point where a visual check was done to make sure our vignette (a sticker on the windscreen) was in order.

You can check up to prices on websites like www.tolls.eu

Road regulations.

Always check the internet for the most up to date (we use the AA website, www.theaa.com)

Traffic drives on the right and overtakes on the left, so you need to ensure your headlights are deflected with stick on adapters

You must carry a high visibility jacket for each person, a first aid kit, warning triangle and a fire extinguisher.

The use of dipped headlights during daylight hours is compulsory outside of built up areas and the use of your horn in built-up areas is prohibited between 10pm and 6am – unless it is to prevent an accident.

If you have a GPS with speed cameras on your ‘Points of Interest’, this function must be disabled, and the use of radar detectors is forbidden (we saw several mobile roadside speed traps, so keep your speed down!)

Winter tyres must be used between 1 November and 31 March if there is snow or ice, check your tyres for the M+S markings.

Fines issued for driving offences must be paid on the spot, and an official receipt issued.

Wheel clamps are used for illegally parked vehicles, and those causing an obstruction can be towed away.

As you drive along you’ll see yellow diamond-shaped signs, these mean that you are on the priority road and others must give way to you. If you see one with a black line through it, you no longer have priority, traffic from the left does – this is usually on approaches to roundabouts.

If we’re not entirely sure who has priority we just take our time and give way to anyone who looks like they aren’t stopping.

Distances are all in kilometres, and so are speed limited. As you enter a town the urban speed limit of 50kph applies, unless otherwise stated, until you are out of the town. Locals will probably choose to ignore this, but as we didn’t wish to be stopped we stuck closely to the limits.

Seat belts must be worn by driver and all passengers in front and rear seats, children under 12 are not allowed in the front seats.

Road conditions

The roads in Bulgaria are generally in a good condition. There are quite a few miles of smooth EU funded tarmac, but some of the village roads have pot-holes in them.

Keep your speed down as pot-holes can appear anywhere, and also watch the car in front of you – if it's local it will undoubtedly swerve to avoid them and give you a fighting chance of missing it.

Standard of driving

The standard of driving was Good

People were generally courteous and would thank us when we indicated that it was safe for them to overtake us. Most of the time we went slowly due to the random pot holes, so we were overtaken a lot. On some of the dual carriageway roads people would sometimes drive in the centre lane as it was often the smoothest.

Do not be surprised if drivers overtake on corners as this seems the norm.

Traffic on the roads once outside the main cities was not limited to cars and lorries, there were also a good few horse and carriages. These tended to stick to the edge of the road, leaving as much space as possible for people to pass, do remember horses scare easily.

General overnight info

Aires/Service points

We only used one aire/service points and were unable to find many listed on any database we have.

Campsites

Bulgaria has only a handful of campsite and surprisingly many of these are run by British expats with facilities that are to European standards.

Free / wild camping

We free/wild camped most of the time when we were in Bulgaria. When we stopped at an attraction, we had to pay to park we would check with the attendant if it was OK to sleep there too – it always was.

We've also slept in the middle of a couple of towns, once checking with tourist information another time asking a security guard.

We had no bother from anyone – other than curious glances.

But as with all free/ wild camping we try to :

Do

Do use common sense and think about whether the spot you have chosen is suitable for a vehicle.

Do take great care to avoid fragile ground and sensitive habitats.

Do respect other people's privacy and avoid parking up next to another van in a secluded spot unless they have invited you to do so.

Do use only biodegradable detergents and drain kitchen waste water tanks only when you find a campsite or other designated place.

Do clear all litter from your camping spot when you leave.

Do keep a low-profile where you camp. So you should avoid loud music, long washing lines, sprawling parties and bbqs, as an example.

Don't

Don't park in areas where signs state "no overnight parking".

Don't park overnight within sight of people's houses.

Don't block access tracks and fields.

Don't make a mess and leave behind litter or waste.

Introduction

As The Second World war ends, The Iron Curtain and the Cold War divides Europe into two. The new socialist, pro-Soviet regimes, put the region in isolation from political consensus of the West – the so called Eastern Bloc is created.

The ideology of communism is imposed in all aspects of public life and it lasts almost half a century, for 45 years in East Europe they remained engulfed by communist ideology and controlled by the ruling Communist parties.

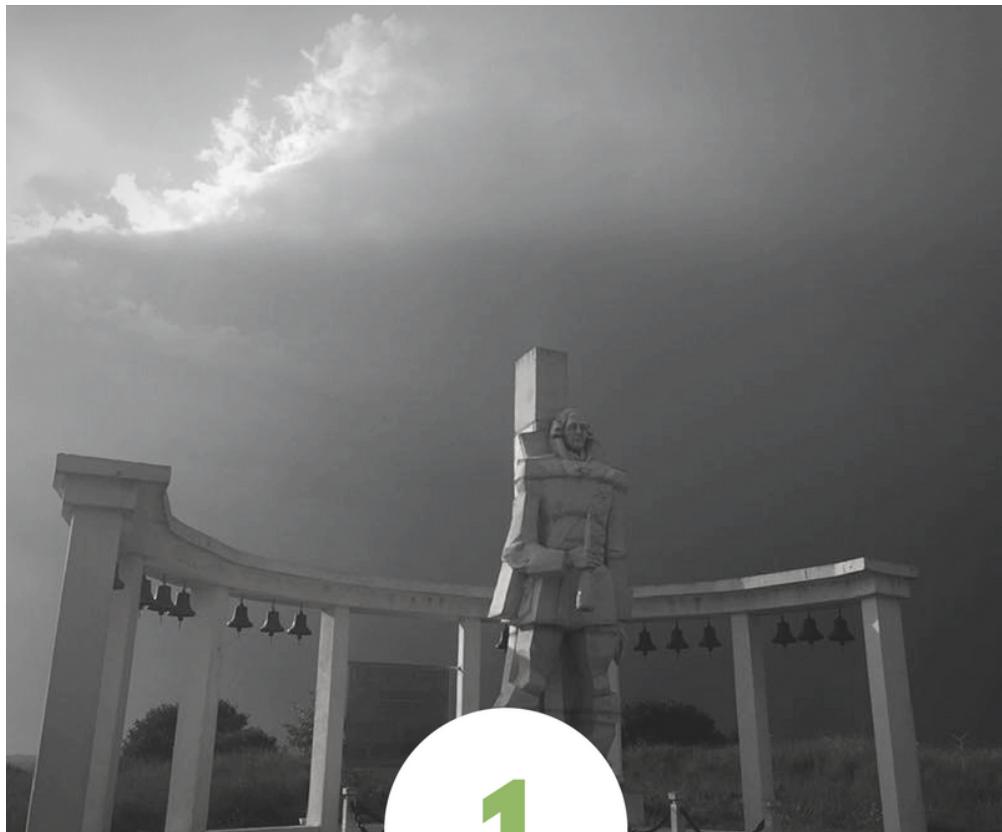
Today the most visible and intriguing evidences of this period are the giant monuments and monumental complexes built to last along with the Communist states.

After the collapse of the socialist regimes in East Europe many of these monuments lost their meaning but still deserve attention for their monumental aesthetics and artistic value. Being abandoned and left with no maintenance they slowly crumble down and disappear from the public memory.

They are to commemorate iconic figures and important dates and events in the national and Communist party's history and follow the historic anniversaries in the next decades.

The peak is the nationwide celebration of the 1300 anniversary of the founding of the Bulgarian state in 1981, seen by some historians as an effort to intertwine the history of the Communist party with that of the Bulgarian nation.

Probably the most iconic symbol of this celebration is the Memorial House of the Bulgarian Communist Party on the peak of Buzludzha.



1

ADMIRAL USHAKOV

BULGARIA

Cape Kaliakra.

Statue of Admiral Ushakov, a Russian Admiral, our first introduction to the art form, he stands guard on this stunningly beautiful piece of headland.

The Battle of Cape Kaliakra was the last naval battle of the Russo-Turkish War of 1787–1792. It took place on 11 August 1791 off the coast of Cape Kaliakra, Bulgaria, in the Black Sea. Neither side lost a ship, but the Ottomans retreated to Istanbul afterward.

The headland should have fame in its own right for its many myths including, when the Ottoman Empire invaded Bulgaria in the late 14th century, burning and raping their way across the country, livestock was slaughtered for sport, villages and crops were set alight and those who resisted were killed where they stood (sound good so far).

The girls who were captured were kept for the pleasure of the Ottoman officers. When the troops approached the cape the 40 girls of the headland, stood strong. They tied their hair together, and jumped from the edge of the cliff; preferring to die on the rocks beneath rather than be captured !

Nightly Stopover Spot

Wild Camp
With Water

GPS
N43.36838
E28.464282





2

THE BUZLUDZHA MONUMENT

BULGARIA

The Buzludzha Monument (Aka the UFO)

This was the one we had been waiting for, it had a Bucket list Appeal.

The monument, built in 1981 on the site of a bloody 1877 battle between Bulgarians and the Ottomans, is in fact dedicated to a secret gathering on the same mountain in 1891.

This gathering led to the formation of the Bulgarian Socialist Party, who would later govern the country under communism. Suffice to say, that is not something that modern Bulgaria wants to be celebrating.

The monument itself is absolutely immense. It once housed huge ceremonial celebrations and includes a 100m high tower which sits at the highest point in the region. Designed by famous Bulgarian architect Georgi Stoilov, it was to be the jewel in the communist monument crown of Bulgaria.

The monument sits at the top of a long flight of steps, looking down over a paved courtyard; it was here that the Party faithful would have gathered for rallies.

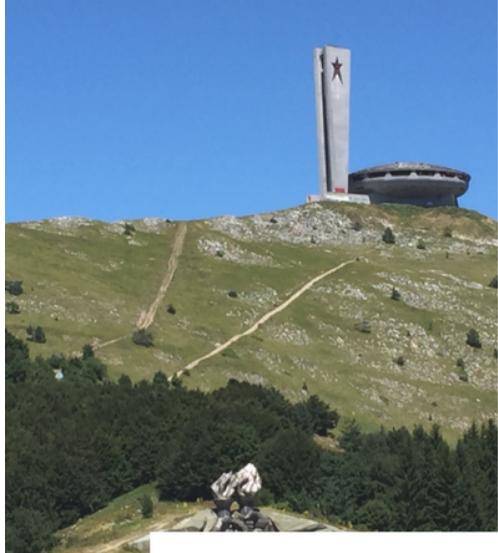
On either side of the stone stairs had once stood great, sculpted flags... though nothing remained of these now.

Graffitied above the main entrance in red paint, “(NEVER) FORGET YOUR PAST”; either side is the somewhat more poetic stanzas stamped in Bulgarian Cyrillic. Most of the letters were missing, their message fading into obscurity. The communist call to arms.

I can only imagine it must have been just that.
Despite the ruin, it is still a thing of immense beauty today.

It's difficult to comprehend why something of such astounding beauty and rarity, could be left to rack and ruin in such a brutal manner. How can historical ideology be so toxic as to prevent the preservation of something so clearly deserving of being treated as a national heritage site?

Back at the bottom of the mountain ridge we stopped to marvel at the still in tact **Torch Monument**. Very little seems to be written about this, but it's fair to assume that the sculpture idealised the alliance between Russia and Bulgaria, of course Which is represented by the larger one ?



Our leap of faith

MUST-SEE DESTINATIONS





3

TORCH MONUMENT

BULGARIA

Nightly Stopover Spot

Wild camp

GPS
N 42.7314
E25.3872



Veliko Târnovo

Medieval history emanates from Veliko Târnovo, its fortified walls and cobbled lanes. One of Bulgaria's oldest towns, Veliko Târnovo once former capital of Bulgaria has as its centrepiece the magnificent restored Tsarevets Fortress and citadel all rebuilt from 1950 onwards.

Traveling around Veliko Târnovo

Walking is ideal for seeing Târnovo, although it boast few pedestrians areas it is a fairly compact city.

Taxi

Taxis are an affordable alternative to public transport. By law, taxis must use meters.

All official taxis are yellow, have fares per kilometre displayed in the window, and have obvious taxi signs on the top. The standard legal fare is 0.79 lv per KM during the day, 0.90 lv per KM at night.



4

ASENEVTSI MONUMENT

BULGARIA

Asenevtsi Monument

This has to be the most recognisable monument in Veliko Tărnovo.

It was built in 1985 to commemorate 800 years since the rebellion of the brothers Asen and Peter.

The tall sword pointing to the skies and situated in the middle of the ensemble symbolises the power of Medieval Bulgaria, you see Asen, Petar, Kaloyan and Ivan Asen, each bearing features that characterised them and their rule

The brother Asen and Peter liberated Bulgaria from Byzantine rule and brought in the Second Bulgarian Empire.

Don't miss the hotel

Most of the buildings in Veliko Tarnovo are cute and old, but there is one massive Communist monolith, the Veliko Tarnovo Hotel, right by the river. It's so striking and out-of-place, but I was fascinated by it. I love that contrast in Eastern Europe, You constantly see these delightful, historic buildings next to these bleak stark structures from the Communist era



5

VELIKO TARNOVO HOTEL

BULGARIA

Nightly Stopover Spot

Camping Veliko
Tarnovo

GPS
N43 04.017
E25 45.183

www.campingvelikotarnovo.com



Sofia

Bulgaria's chilled out capital is overlooked by most visitors, heading straight to the coast or the ski resorts, but they're missing something ace.

Sofia is a largely modern, youthful city, with an amazing array of onion-domed churches, Ottoman mosques and cool communist era monuments that lend an eclectic, exotic mixture of a city.

The Sofia Transport Network

Public transport generally runs from 5.30am to around 11pm every day. The Sofia Urban Mobility Centre (www.sofiatraffic.bg) maintains a helpful website with fares and an updated transport map.

Attractions in the centre are normally located within easy walking distance, and you're not likely to need the tram or trolley in most instances.

Metro

Sofia's shiny almost new metro links the city centre to both Sofia Airport and the central train and bus stations. It's divided into two lines, with the lines crossing at Central Serdika Station. Tickets cost 1.60 lv, but cannot be used on other forms of public transport. Buy tickets at windows and ticket machines located in the stations.the automated machine also has an English language setting

Bus, Tram & Trolleybus

Tickets for trams, buses and trolleybuses cost 1.60 lv each (8 lv for 10 trips) and can be purchased at kiosks near stops or from on-board ticket machines.

Consider buying a day pass (4 lv) to save the hassle of buying individual tickets.

Taxi

Taxis are an affordable alternative to public transport. By law, taxis must use meters.

All official taxis are yellow, have fares per kilometre displayed in the window, and have obvious taxi signs on the top. The standard legal fare is 0.79 lv per KM during the day, 0.90 lv per KM at night.



THE NDK

BULGARIA

The National Palace of Culture

A huge complex wanted by Zhivkov's daughter Lyudmila and still operating as a multifunctional cultural centre, housing concert halls, exhibition space, offices, shops and restaurants.

Throughout the year (except August) it hosts a variety of cultural events from classical to avant garde; concerts, film festivals, art exhibits, fashion shows and trade fairs as well as major conferences.

Opened in 1981 to celebrate the 1300th anniversary of the founding of the Bulgaria state. It is quite cool in the fact that the building is Hexagonal in shape.



7

SOVIET MONUMENT

BULGARIA

Monument to the Soviet Army

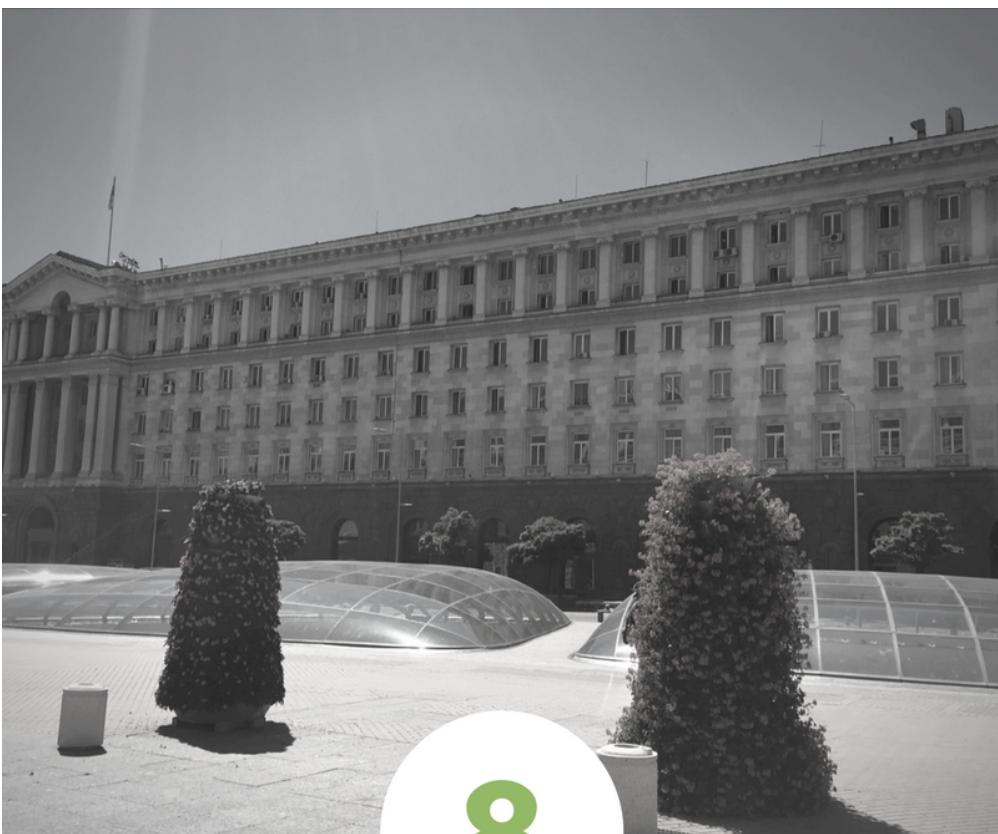
Most definitely erected to pay homage to the might of the Motherland. Built in 1952 and was ready in 1954, ten years after the Soviet liberation from Germany. The monument was built by a leading group of artists led by the sculpture Ivan Funesv.

The Monument to the Soviet Army honours Russian soldiers who died fighting in Bulgarian campaigns during World War II.

Over the years, the ground level relief has been continually vandalised with paint by radical, reformists and no doubt a few yobs who just like using spray paint. Acts of defacement include spraying on the colours of the Ukrainian flag, adding balaclavas to the soldiers and painting the soldiers so that they resemble well-known American icons such as Superman, Captain America etc.

Sadly for us, on our visit it was completely intact, although on the whole it seemed, like many communist monuments very neglected, the reminders of the spraying paints could just about be seen....

Maybe you'll be lucky enough to see some local artists work ?



8

THE LARGO

The Largo

Right in the centre of Sofia, almost impossible to miss, looms the strict, monumental architectural complex The Largo – one of the greatest socialist architecture examples in Eastern Europe.

It was built in the early 1950s, in the space created by the WW2 bombings, where over a quarter of the city was destroyed.

Rather oversized for the 7.5 million Bulgarian population, but in typical communist fashion it was a show of **Power over Need!**

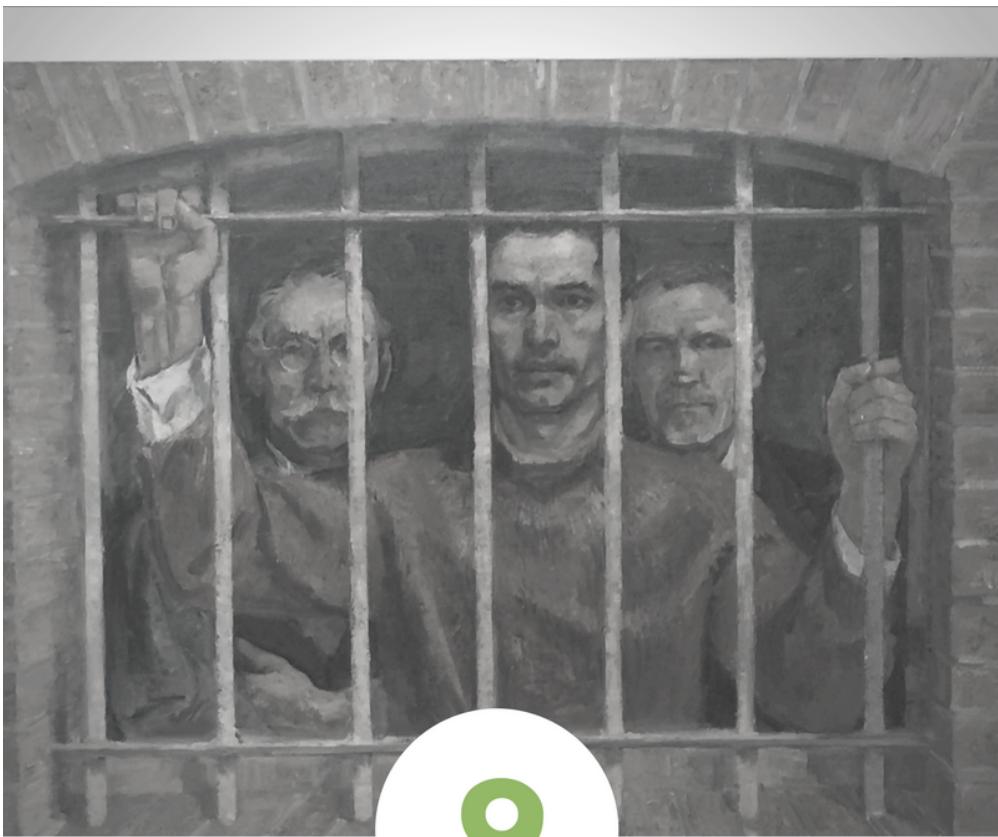
The Largo consisted of government buildings, the Ministries of Electrification & Heavy Industry, the Party House (the headquarters of the Communist Party) and the central department store.

It also used to include attractions like the former leader's Georgi Dimitrov's mausoleum, constructed in only six days as the great Bulgarian socialist leader died unexpectedly during his visit to Moscow, pulled down shortly after the fall of communism.

TZUM, at the time Bulgaria's most prestigious department store where the products of the socialist workers' achievements were on display for local and international visitors. It is still today an up market store, but no longer state controlled.

The important guests used to stay at the nearby Hotel Balkan, also part of the complex – the building nowadays is named the Hotel Sheraton. So maybe you could stay a night or two ?

After the fall of the communist government in 1989, the symbols of communism that decorated the Largo were removed, with the most symbolic act being the removing of the red star from the former Party House using a helicopter- this can now be seen in the museum of socialist art (see below)



9

MUSEUM OF SOCIALIST ARTS

BULGARIA

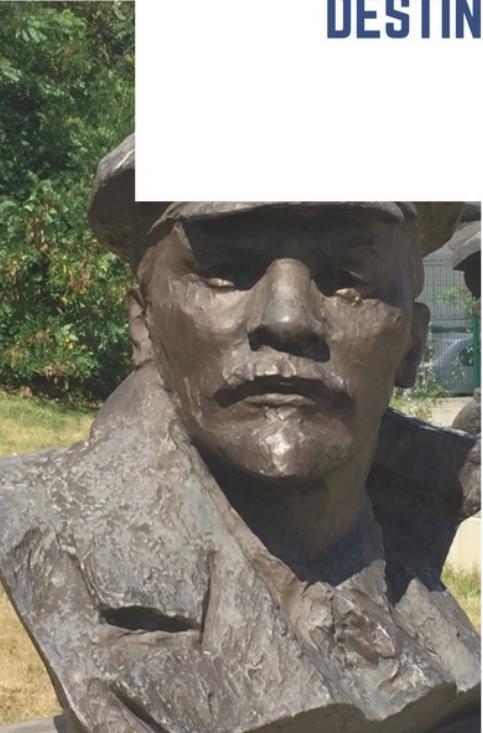
Museum of Socialist Arts

Very similar to Memento Park in Budapest, this was in my must see list even before we arrived, so we took the short metro ride to see it.

The Museum of Socialist Art is a branch of Sofia's National Art Gallery and currently displays some 150 pieces produced between Bulgaria's socialist period (1944-1989).

There is the chance to watch a 30 minute long video, praising the work of the people, of course!

The main draw here for us was the garden where a huge selection of sculptures are displayed. Former public statues of characters such as Lenin, Ché Guevara or Georgi Dimitrov along with other smaller sculptures of workers, mothers and agricultures can be seen



Our leap of faith

MUST-SEE DESTINATIONS



10

SOCIALIST HOUSING

BULGARIA

Socialist Accommodation

On the outskirts of Sofia and one of those areas built during the socialist regime to accommodate the multitude of people who came from the Bulgarian countryside to work in the industrial sector. While a few of them were accommodated in downtown Sofia, where the current residents were forced to share their homes with the newcomers, by splitting big apartments into smaller flats, many other people moved into these huge concrete constructions characterising the Soviet outskirts all over Eastern Europe.

Wandering around this concrete jungle was one of the strongest experiences of my trip so far. But, to be honest, Sofia's soviet outskirts had already gotten to me when we drove around them, and I saw blocks upon blocks of concrete buildings stretching all around the town I couldn't wait to explore, as a Devon lad the whole concept of Tower blocks is alien.

Nightly Stopover Spot

Camper Parking
Sofia

GPS
N42.74319
E23.28537



Plovdiv

The south of Bulgaria was once ruled by the ancient Thracian Kings, and there remain a number of royal burial mounds spread far and wide across these grassy plains. The old town creates a thrilling backdrop to the city, which brims with life ahead of its reign as European Capital of Culture 2019.

Like Rome, Plovdiv straddles seven hills; but as Europe's oldest continuously inhabited city, it's far more ancient, and equally fascinating.

Traveling around Plovdiv

Plovdiv is best experienced on foot. Much of the old town is off-limits to cars during daylight hours



11

HILLOCK OF FRATERNITY.

BULGARIA

Hillock of Fraternity.

In the city of Plovdiv, a 1974 monument set out to recreate the grandeur of those ancient burial grounds in the form of the “Hillock of Fraternity.”

Created on the 30th anniversary of Bulgaria’s Socialist Revolution, the memorial complex at Plovdiv is shaped like a vast, concrete wreath. Inside, it contains the interred remains of partisan fighters from the region.

The monument was created by the architects Lubomir Chinkov and Vladimir Rangelov, while the figures that stand inside were the work of sculptor Lubomir Dalchev.

The Hillock of Fraternity has sadly fallen into disrepair in recent years. An eternal flame that once burnt inside this 90-metre installation has long since been allowed to die, and nowadays the outside of the monument bears the scars of graffiti and neglect.



Our leap of faith

MUST-SEE DESTINATIONS





12

THE ALESHA MONUMENT

BULGARIA

The Alesha Monument - The Lone Solider

High above the town and visible from almost every view point in this beautiful city is, at 11 metres in height, and is located on the Bonardzhik Hill in Plovdiv.

It consists of the figure of a Soviet Army soldier with his head turned to the east, holding down a Shpagin machine pistol in one hand. Its foundation bears a five-pointed star and an inscription in Bulgarian reading:-

“Glory to the Invincible Soviet Liberator Army.”

The name “Alesha” is a Russian diminutive of the name “Aleksey”. It is derived from the name of the person whose photo was the model for the sculpture but it is also seen to represent the unknown Soviet soldier who fought the Nazi in the Great Patriotic War.

The monument was built in 1954-1957, and is said to be the largest granite monument in the world. It is located close to the monument dedicated to Plovdiv's liberation from the Ottoman Turkish Empire in the Russian-Turkish War of 1877-1878.

The statue of the Lone Soviet Soldier can be reached through several paved paths circling the hill that is covered with greenery.

Despite several local attempts to dismantle the Alesha Monument, it has been preserved almost intact.

Plovdiv city Post Office on the other hand, is a fine example of the art style and in daily use.....



13

PLOVDIV POST OFFICE

BULGARIA

Nightly Stopover Spot

Wild camp

GPS
N42.150051
E24.721747



*But...not all Bulgarian monuments lay
in ruins*



14

1300 YEARS

BULGARIA

Monument to the Founders of Bulgaria- 1300 Years

You might think that given the communist label, any monument built during the communists era will have been treated the same way. But, this is not the case. In fact one of the best maintained monuments in the country was built by the communists. The difference is that these monuments do not celebrate communism or the Soviets, they celebrate Bulgaria.

One example of this lies in the town of Schuman; the Monument to the Founders of Bulgaria.

Built in 1981 into the side of a large hill, this monument celebrates the 1300 years since the country's founders first set foot on the land.

Climb to the top of the 1300 steps and you will struggle to find a difference between this and other monuments left to rot. It uses the same concrete cubism as the other communist built monuments of that era.

The difference is that it does not hold any reference to communism. No hammer and sickle icons and no mention of the partisans.

In the language of Bulgarian monuments, it seems that this is all that separates a monument from being loved, and being forgotten.

As we enter the park, although the sun was shining and it was a pleasant day, there was an eeriness about the place that made us both look at each other rather nervously as we surveyed our surroundings and laid eyes upon the Transformer like stone giants that looked menacingly down on us from all sides.

Firstly we see Khan Asparuh (who is considered to be the founder of Bulgaria), standing with his sword stuck in the ground, hands raised and pointing in different directions to where Bulgaria will be.

His sculpture is followed by the 18 metre-tall sculptures of Tervel, Krum, and Omurtag (Bulgarian khans who reigned in the 8th and the 9th centuries). They are surrounded by fragments of old Byzantine chronicles depicting a time almost forgotten.

The wise thought of Khan Omurtag, a mantra for the country, is inscribed beneath them:

“Even if a man lives well, he dies and another one comes into existence. Let the one who comes later, upon seeing this inscription, remember the one who had made it”

The outdoor three-panelled mosaic is the largest of its kind in Europe, they depict the change in religious views and the creation of the Cyrillic alphabet.

The granite lion atop the memorial weighs in at 1,000 tons and at no point on the actual site can you get a clear view of it, due to its huge size, but from a distance – Wow !

Cool facts in total, 50,000 cubic metres of concrete and 2,400 tons of reinforced steel were used to construct the monument – that's a lot of concrete and a lot of steel !!

Nightly Stopover Spot

Wild camp

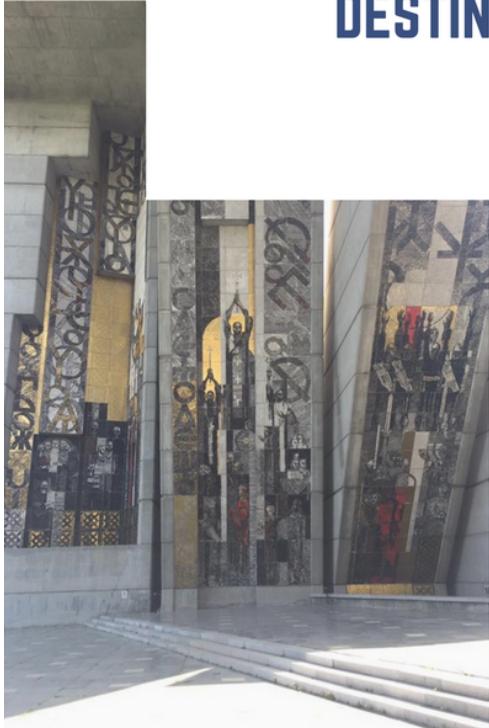
GPS
N43.257858
E26.923102





Our leap of faith

MUST-SEE DESTINATIONS



Why visit Bulgaria?

Love or hate the art forms that we choose to spend our time viewing, they represent only a tiny part of this countries rich history

The book only serves to highlight this, yes we have focused on a singular art form, but away from this hidden around each corner is a new and undiscovered attraction. The country is awash with history, legends and folk laws having been invaded by so many historic races, the legacy they have left, is here for the finding

Bulgaria has a lot to offer, from majestic mountains to sunny Black Sea beaches. You can hike for days high into the mountains, sip cocktails in the modern city of Sofia, see one of the best examples of a Roman amphitheater in Plovdiv or drink the world famous wine of Melnik. All before dipping your toe into the stunning Black Sea.

Very often the country is seen as a transit route for motorhome heading into Greece, but you should not write off the country, what it lacks in dedicated parking areas it makes up for in stunning beauty.

Bulgaria was a stunning country full of character and charm.

Should you visit ? - Oh Yes!