

Sofia, Bulgaria

Presentation by
Paul Pacter

www.PaulVisits.com

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Bulgaria In Europe



Area: 42,855 sq mi (= Virginia).

Population: 6,437,000 (2024).

Capital and Largest City:

Sofia: Pop 1,100,000.

Alt: 2,000' above sea level.

Next biggest city:

Plovdiv: Pop 330,000.

Bulgarian Language

Bulgarian Cyrillic Alphabet									
БЪЛГАРСКА КИРИЛИЧЕСКА АЗБУКА									
A	В	Ѳ	Г	Д	Е	Ж	З	И	Ѳ
Аа	Вв	ѲѲ	Гг	Дд	Ее	Жж	Зз	Ии	ѲѲ
К	Л	М	Н	О	П	Р	С	Т	У
Кк	Лл	Мм	Нн	Оо	Пп	Рр	Сс	Тт	Уу
Ф	Х	Ц	Ч	Ш	Щ	Ъ	Ь	Ю	Я
Фф	Хх	Цц	Чч	Шш	Щщ	Ъъ	Ьь	Юю	Яя

Native language of 85% of people.

Official script: Cyrillic.

– **Created:** In Bulgaria 9th c AD.

– **Also official in:** Russia, Belarus, Bulgaria, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Ukraine, and Mongolia.

Ethnic groups Within Bulgaria's 6,500,000 people (2021):

– **Bulgarian:** 79%.

– **Turks:** 8%.

– **Romani:** 4%.

– **Others:** 7%. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Bulgaria/People>

Jews in Bulgaria:

– **Pre-WWII:** 48,000.

– **Today:** 2,000 (self-identified).

Median age (2024): 45.1.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_countries_by_median_age

Religion: (2025 Est.)

– **Eastern Orthodox:** 80%.

– **Muslim:** 13% (but mostly non-observant and against veils).

– **Other or No Religion:** 7%.

<https://www.thearda.com/world-religion/national-profiles?u=35c>

Bulgaria Memberships:

– EU (since 2007).

– NATO (since 2004).

– Schengen (since 2025).

– Euro (since Jan 1, 2026).



Bulgaria is currently experiencing two huge crises, with massive implications for its future:

Crisis No 1: One of the world's fastest population declines.

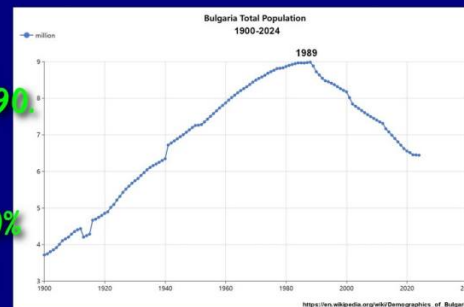
Crisis No 2: Severe political instability.



Crisis No 1: Population Decline

Population peaked 1989 at 9,000,000. Down to about 6,500,000 now.

25% decline since 1990. Some rural areas 50% decline.



And projections are for steep declines to continue.

– Down to about 5,500,000 in 2050.

– And down about 3,500,000 (or even less) by 2100.

UN Population Division Bulgaria Forecasts (000):

2025			2050			2100		
High	Med	Low	High	Med	Low	High	Med	Low
6,728	6,715	6,701	5,760	5,402	5,047	5,225	3,531	2,260

<https://data.un.org/Data.aspx?g=bulgaria&f=PopDiv&f=variableID%3A12%3BcrID%3A100>

Why steep declines in population:

– High emigration by educated and young people seeking work and better life.

– One of lowest birth rates in world.

– Very high mortality rate due to combination of:

– Ageing families.

– Poverty.

– Weak healthcare system.

“All demographic projections for Bulgaria in the coming decades remain bleak”.

<https://www.osw.waw.pl/en/>

More Bulgaria population facts:

– 60% of children are born to unwed mothers. 2023, Eurostat.

France is 66%. USA is 40%.

<https://sofiaglobe.com/2023/04/13/eurostat-59-9-of-children-in-bulgaria-born-outside-marriage/>

– 37% of Bulgarian households were single person households. 2024.

Driven by ageing population and urbanization.

<https://www.euromonitor.com/households-bulgaria-report>

USA is 29%.

Crisis No. 2: Severe Political Instability

Government: Unitary parliamentary republic.

– Republic = Head of state elected by people, not hereditary.

– Parliamentary = People elect parliament. Parliament elects head of government.

– Unitary = Central control, limited local powers.

President of Bulgaria:

– Elected by the people. Head of state (foreign relations). Head of military. Appoints interim PM when parliament cannot agree on a PM.

– This has happened in 2013, 2014, 2017, 2021, 2022, 2024, 2026!

Current PM is a “caretaker” until Apr 19, 2026 parliamentary election.

– President can veto laws. But simple majority of parliament can override.

Prime Minister:

– Head of government. Appoints cabinet. Responsible for all government departments except military.

– Usually the head of the largest party or coalition in Parliament. However, if Parliament cannot agree, then President appoints a caretaker PM and calls a parliamentary election.

– That's the current situation.

Recent History - President:

Rumen Radev, who had been president since 2017, resigned December 2025 amid corruption controversy.



Ruman Radev

He had constant conflicts with Prime Ministers, especially Boyko Borissov, who Radev alleged was corrupt. **Borissov was PM on and off 2009-2021.**



Boyko Borissov

So in Jan 2026, after Radev resigned, Iliana Iotova became President.



- Socialist Party.
- She was VP under Radev 2017-2026.
- Previously, she was MEP 2007-2017.
- On Feb 18, 2026, because Parliament could not agree on a PM, she called an election for April 19, 2026.

Recent History – Prime Minister:

- Since 2017, ongoing popular protests about corruption.

- From 2017 to 2026 Bulgaria has had 12 Prime Ministers! And will have #13 later this month!

13

- On Feb 19, 2026, Iotova appointed Andrey Gyurov "caretaker PM" until parliamentary election on April 19, 2026. Central banker, academe.



Bulgaria Parliament "National Assembly"

- Unicameral.
- 240 members.
- Pass laws, approve state budget and tax rates, and elect the Prime Minister and Council of Ministers (cabinet).



Parties currently

Economy

GDP 2024: US\$113 billion. (USA 2024: \$28.75 trillion).

GDP Per Capita 2024: US\$17,596. (USA 2024: \$84,534).

Lowest per capita in EU.

Unemployment 2025: 3.5%. (USA 2025: 4.2%).

Inflation 2025: 2.4%. (USA 2024: 2.9%).

<https://data.worldbank.org/country/bulgaria>

US citizens: No visa needed.

Drive on: Right. Roadsigns are in Bulgarian using Cyrillic characters.

UK Gov't Foreign Travel Website:

"Road conditions can be dangerous.... Many roads (and pavements) are in poor repair.... Driving standards are generally poor, and drivers can be aggressive, particularly on motorways. Avoid confrontations."

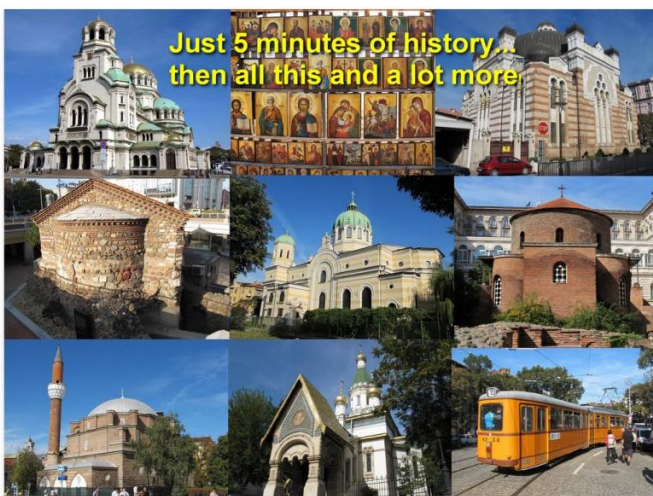
Pan-European emergency no: 112.

History- 1

1st c AD: Romans took control of entire Balkan Peninsula.

5th c AD: Byzantines control entire Balkan. Bring Christianity.

6 c AD: Slavs took control. Christian.



History - 2

681–1396: Bulgars from Ukraine take control. Bulgarian empire.

14th c.: Invasion by Ottomans.

15th-19th c: Under Ottoman rule.

- Bulgarian culture suppressed.
- Christianity suppressed.
- Islamisation.
- Heavy taxes.

History - 3

1876: Rebellion against Ottoman rule. 30,000 Bulgarians killed.

1877-1878: Russo-Turkish War. Expelled the Ottomans.

3 March 1878: But remained a principality in Ottoman Empire.

National holiday: Liberation Day – 3 March (1878).

History - 4

5 October 1908: Declared Independence from Ottoman Empire.

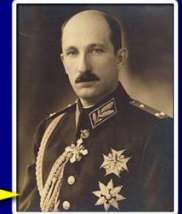
WW 1: Allied with Germany, Austria, Hungary (losing side). Lost 100,000 soldiers plus territory plus heavy reparations payments. Economy ruined.

History - 5

1918-1943:

- Dictatorship under Tsar Boris III. →
- Rise of Communist Party, anarchist groups and coup attempts.

WW 2: Bulgaria entered in 1941 as a member of the Axis.



History - 6

But: Tsar Boris III refused to deport Bulgarian Jews.

- **Died suddenly 1943.**
- **Presumed poisoned by Nazis.**

1944: Communists took power.

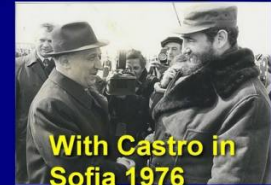
Post WW2: Soviet satellite "People's Republic". One-party rule. Planned economy.

History - 7

1954-1989: Todor Zhivkov was Communist Leader of Bulgaria



With Brezhnev in Sofia 1967



With Castro in Sofia 1976

"A good journalist is not the one that writes what people say, but the one that writes what he is supposed to write."

I was so sure you would like that Todor Zhivkov quote that I found some others:



General Secretary of the Bulgarian Communist Party 1954 – 1989

"The police belongs to the people and the people belong to the police."

"We must make a radical turn, at 360 degrees."

"This year - a factory of semiconductors. Next year a factory of whole conductors!"

History - 8

1989: Communists gave up power after the fall of the Soviet Union. But...

1990: ...The same people renamed themselves the Socialist Party and won Bulgaria's first free election.

History - 9

1991: New constitution.
Parliamentary republic. Broad
range of freedoms.

2004: Joined NATO.

2007: Joined EU.

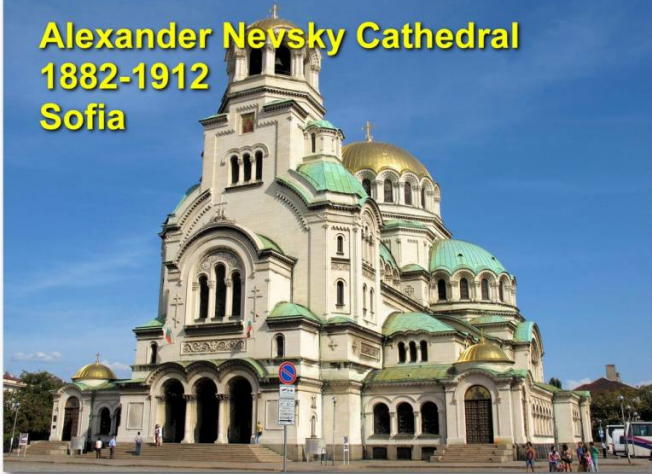
Continuing Social Problems:
Inflation, unemployment,
corruption, population decline.

SOFIA

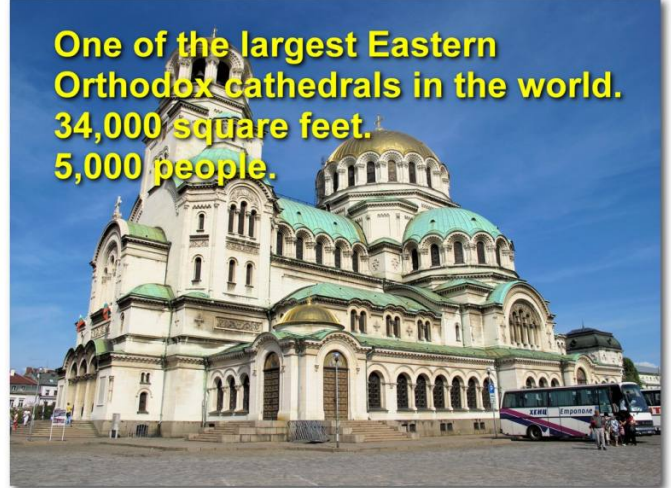
Population: 1,300,000.

Wikipedia: "Nice parks;
vibrant city center; many bars,
restaurants, and nightclubs;
250 historic landmarks and
monuments; healthy mineral
springs, hiking, and skiing."

Alexander Nevsky Cathedral
1882-1912
Sofia



**One of the largest Eastern
Orthodox cathedrals in the world.**
34,000 square feet.
5,000 people.



Alexander Nevsky Cathedral



**National Assembly (Parliament) was
established 1879 by new Constitution.**
This is the original Assembly building
built 1884-1928.



Notice the gold bricks...

**Sofia's central boulevards are all
paved with Viennese yellow
cobblestones.**



Bulgaria National Assembly Building
Built 1950-1954 during early
Communist period.
"Stalinist"
style.





President's Office Building
 – President is Head of State.
 – Commander in chief of armed forces.
 – Can veto legislation, but veto can be overridden by simple majority.



President's Office Building
 Hourly changing of the guard.



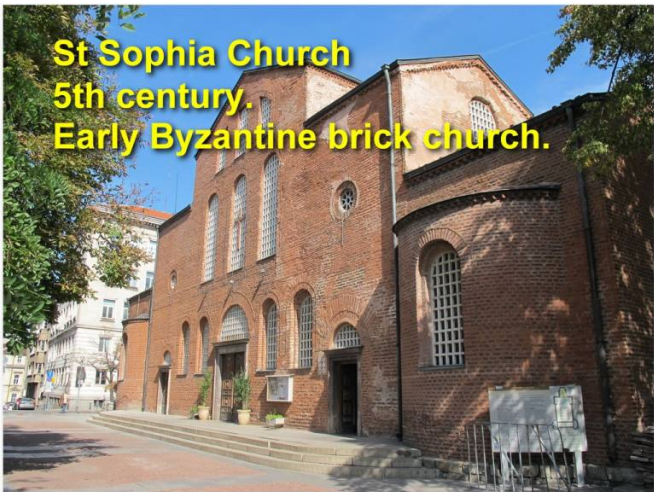
Church of St George
 Built 4th c as Roman Temple

Oldest building in Sofia

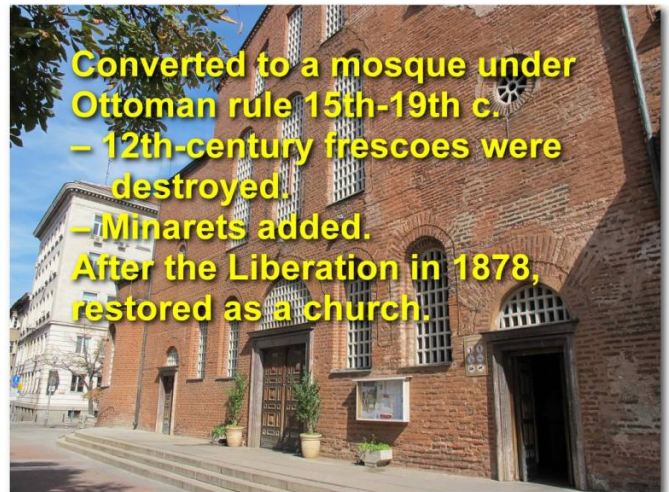


Church of St George - Sofia

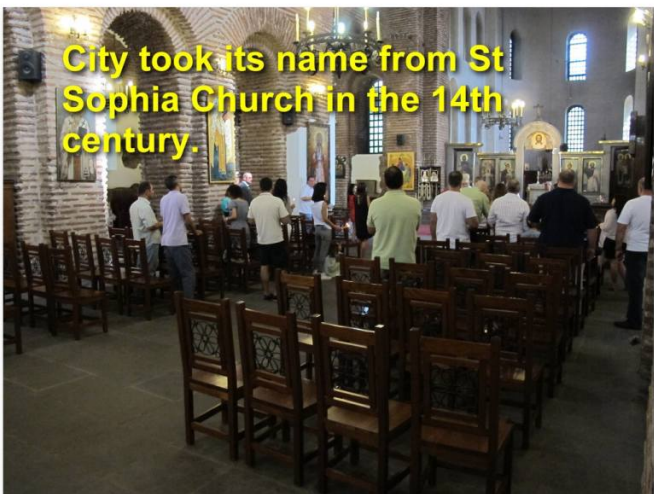
Ukrainian Orthodox Cross



St Sophia Church
 5th century.
 Early Byzantine brick church.



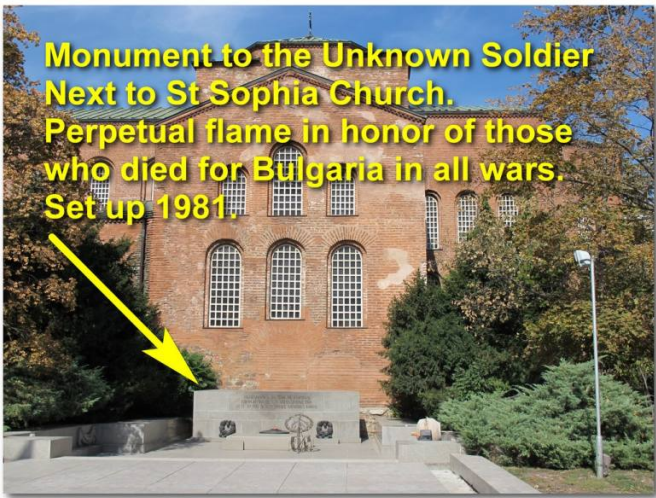
Converted to a mosque under Ottoman rule 15th-19th c.
 – 12th-century frescoes were destroyed.
 – Minarets added.
 After the Liberation in 1878, restored as a church.



City took its name from St Sophia Church in the 14th century.



St Sophia Church



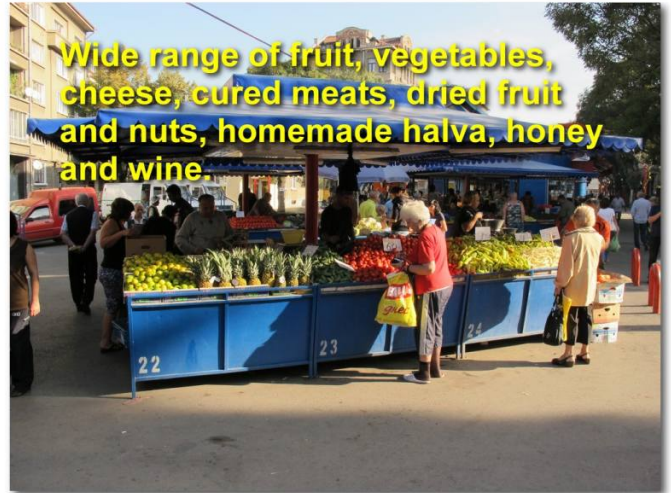
Monument to the Unknown Soldier
Next to St Sophia Church.
Perpetual flame in honor of those
who died for Bulgaria in all wars.
Set up 1981.



Lion guarding the monument is
controversial.
People said its
face is one of
defeat. Statue
was removed
for 30 years.



Ladies Market
Zhenski Pazar



Wide range of fruit, vegetables,
cheese, cured meats, dried fruit
and nuts, homemade halva, honey
and wine.



Zhenski Pazar
Note: Customers should not touch
the fruit or veg. Just point.



Ladies Market - Zhenski Pazar
Open 9am to 6pm
Local - not touristic



Ladies Market - Zhenski Pazar

ЛВ = LV (Lev)
КГ = KG
(Kilogram)

So 1 Lev/Kg
= 58 US cents/Kg
= 26 US cents/Lb
Now Euros, not Lev



Ladies Market - Zhenski Pazar



Ladies Market - Zhenski Pazar



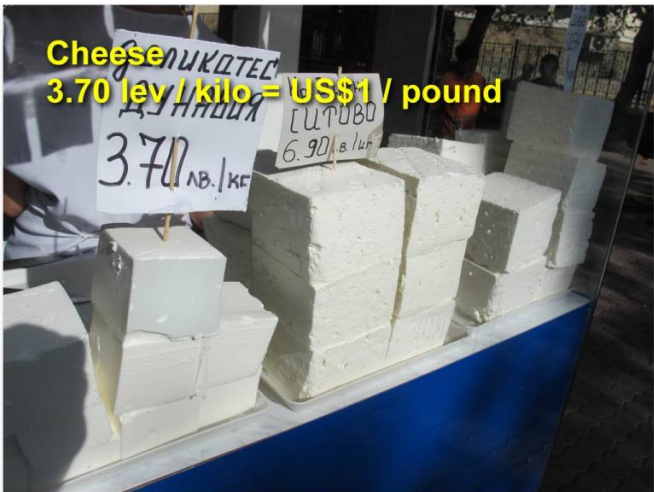
Celeriac (Celery Root)



Ladies Market - Zhenski Pazar



Kufteta – Traditional Bulgarian meat patties. 60% pork, 40% beef.



Cheese
3.70 lev / kilo = US\$1 / pound



Ladies Market – Zhenski Pazar



Ladies Market – Zhenski Pazar



Ladies Market – Zhenski Pazar



Ladies Market – Zhenski Pazar



Shops near the Ladies Market

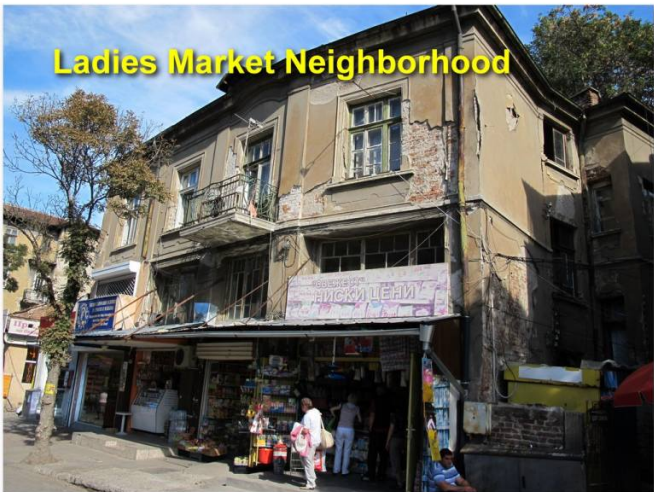
**РИБА = FISH
ПАЗАР = MARKET**



Shops near the Ladies Market



"Newsstand" sells only alcoholic beverages (especially vodka) and cigarettes"

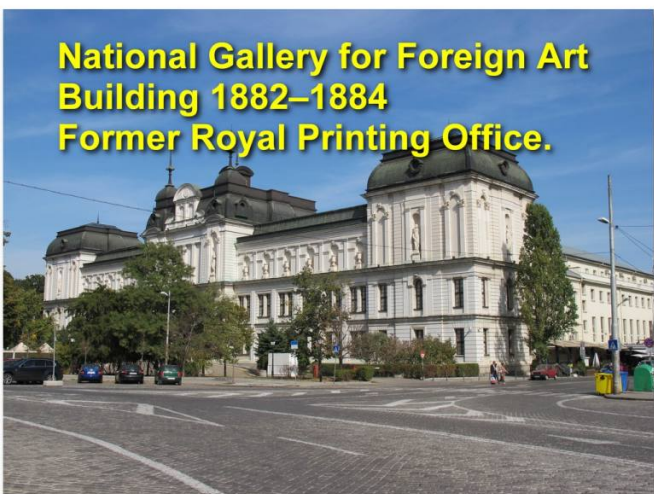


Ladies Market Neighborhood

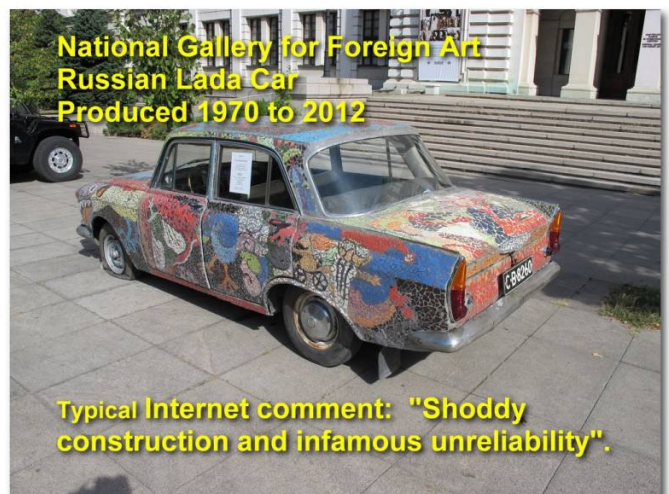


**National Art Gallery
Bulgaria's largest art collection –
around 60,000 works.
Mainly Bulgarian art 4th to 20th
centuries.**

Notice the yellow cobblestones



**National Gallery for Foreign Art
Building 1882–1884
Former Royal Printing Office.**



**National Gallery for Foreign Art
Russian Lada Car
Produced 1970 to 2012**

**Typical Internet comment: "Shoddy
construction and infamous unreliability".**

National Gallery for Foreign Art
No Photos
 Halls 1, 2, 3: Indian art.
 Hall 4: Japanese woodblock prints.
 Hall 5: African sculptures and masks.
 Hall 6: Buddhist art from Southeast Asia, primarily Burma (10th-13th c).
 Halls 7, 8, 9: European fine arts 15th-20th centuries. Includes Correggio, Goya, Renoir, Rodin, Chagall, Picasso, Miro, Dali.
 Halls 11-19: Special Exhibitions.



National Opera and Ballet
 First opera company in Bulgaria was founded in 1890.
 – First opera performed 1909.
 – First ballet performed 1928.
 – Building built 1947-1953.

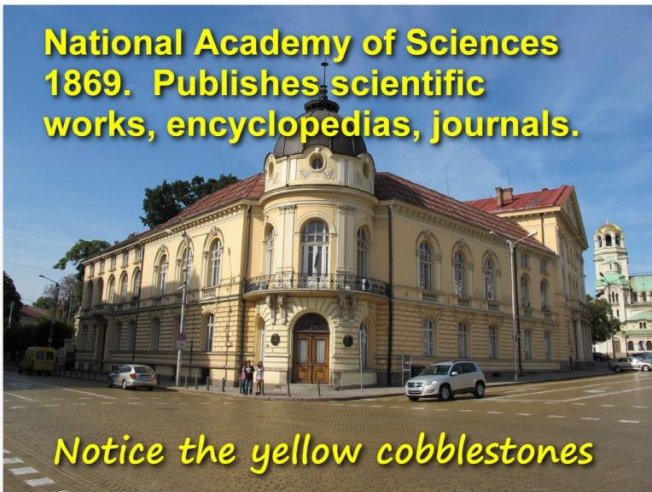


Opera - Ballet Tickets
 20 to 50 leva (US\$12-30)
 English surtitles

Not My Photo



National Palace of Culture - 1981
 Multifunctional: Concerts, conferences, exhibitions.



National Academy of Sciences
 1869. Publishes scientific works, encyclopedias, journals.

Notice the yellow cobblestones



Ivan Vazov National Theatre
 Bulgaria's national theatre.
 Built 1907.

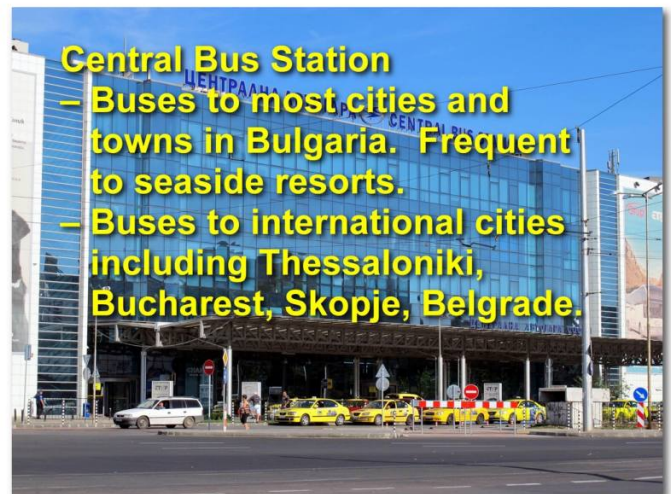
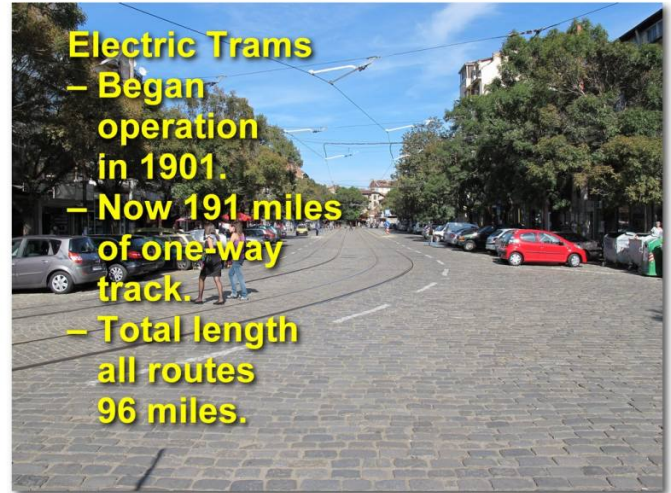


Sofia Metro (Subway)

Opened 1998. System Length 32 miles.
 4 lines. 47 stations + 10 under construction.
 Ridership 2024: Daily 470,000.
 Annual 93 million.
 Ticket: €0.80 (daily max €2).

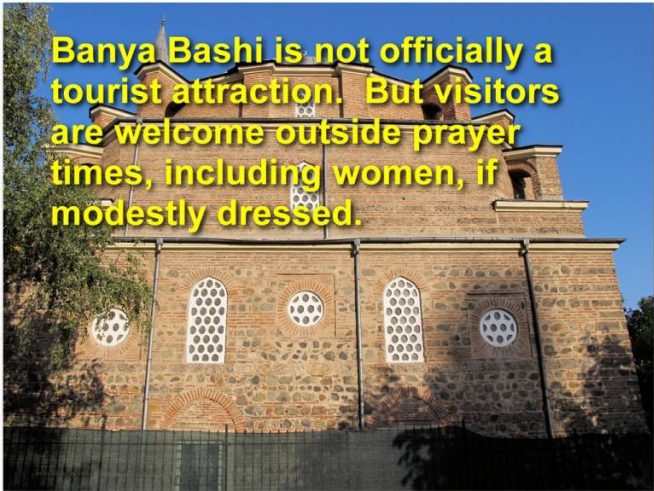


Sofia Metro Map
 March 2026



Central Railway Station
Bulgaria has an extensive but run-down rail network.

- International trains to Istanbul, Bucharest, Minsk, Kiev, Belgrade, Thessaloniki.
- Trains to more than 600 Bulgarian cities and towns.



Banya Bashi is not officially a tourist attraction. But visitors are welcome outside prayer times, including women, if modestly dressed.

Banya Bashi Mosque
1576

The only one of 70 Ottoman era mosques still standing in Sofia.



Banya Bashi Mosque Interior

Not my photo

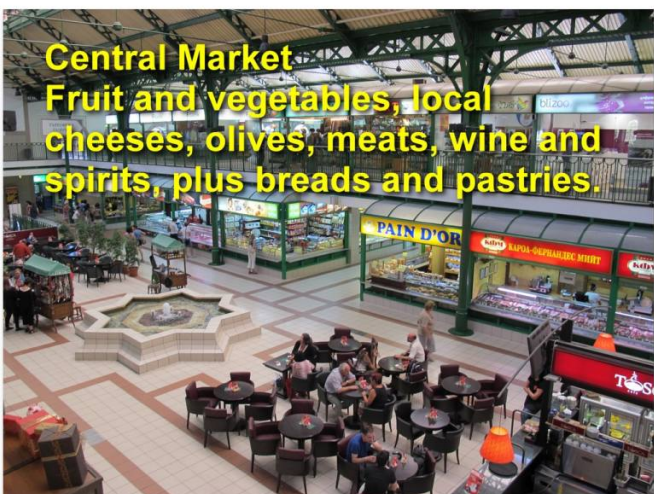
Banya Bashi Mosque is at the Serdika Metro Stop. Serdika is a Roman town (29 BC to 447 AD) that is now Sofia. We will visit Serdika in a few minutes.



Central Market
1909



Central Market
Fruit and vegetables, local cheeses, olives, meats, wine and spirits, plus breads and pastries.



Central Market also has a few coffee and drinks bars and fast-food kiosks.



Monument to Vasil Levski
Erected 1895
Bulgarian revolutionary and a national hero today.

He planned a revolutionary movement to liberate Bulgaria from Ottoman rule in 1870s.

Electric bus (Trolleybus)

There are 8 trolleybus lines in Sofia. Plus lines with new battery-operated electric buses (no overhead wires).

Central Mineral Baths
Traditional Turkish bathhouse.
Opened 1913. Closed in 1986.
2015 Became Regional History Museum.

Regional History Museum
Eight halls.
Over 1000 exhibits about Sofia history from 6000 BC to present.
Including:
- Marie Antoinette's 18th c carriage.
- Clock presented to Prince Ferdinand by Queen Victoria.

Regional History Museum



National Archaeology Museum
15th c former Buyuk Mosque



National Archaeology Museum
- Prehistory Hall.
- Treasures from the late Bronze Age to late Antiquity.
- Main Hall: Diverse collection of items from ancient Thrace, Greece and Rome to the late Middle Ages.
- Medieval Section.

Ancient Roman Complex of Serdica
- Serdica is Roman name of Sofia.
- Romans occupied 29 BC.
- Huns sacked 447 AD.





Serdica ruins were discovered digging a Metro line 2010-2012. Building foundations, baths, public toilets, roads, water systems, part of an amphitheatre.



Ancient Serdica as discovered in 2010-2012

But then came "restoration" 2013-2016. Or is it "renovation"? Or is it simply "kitsch"?
News reports (edited for length):
"Controversy over reconstruction of parts of the buildings and walls, which protesters dismissed as kitsch".
"Citizens and experts protested against the methods and materials used in the reconstruction works".



The ruins of ancient Serdica went from this in 2012 to what's on the next few slides.



2nd c AD Roman Ruins? Or kitsch? 2018



2nd c AD Roman Ruins? Or kitsch? 2018



Crafts and Antiques Market
– Two rows of tables.
– Alexander Nevsky Sq. (near cathedral) →



Monument to the Bulgarian volunteers in the Russo-Turkish War of 1877-1878

Crafts and Antiques Market

Daily 10:00 to 18:00.



Prices increase if buyer is foreign. Must haggle!

No English. Haggle by calculator.



"Treasures" include music records, daggers, Russian military helmets, communist memorabilia (questionable authenticity?), old violins, silver jewelry, religious icon paintings.

Traditional embroidery, fabrics, and rugs



Embroideries etc.



Sofia Central Synagogue
Built 1905-1909.
Largest Sephardic synagogue in Europe.
Austrian architect.
Resembles a former Vienna synagogue.



Built to hold 1,200 worshippers.
Today 50 or 60 people attend Sabbath services.



Synagogues Remaining in Bulgaria

Burgas Synagogue	1909	Now art gallery
Dobrich Synagogue	1887	Theatre
Gotse Delchev Syn.	Early 20 c	Charity
Pazardzhik Syn.	1850	Empty
Plovdiv Synagogue	1887	Functioning
Samokov Synagogue	1860	In ruins
Shumen Synagogue	19 c	In ruins
Silistra Synagogue	19 c	Preserved
Sofia Synagogue	1909	Functioning
Varna Sephardic Syn.	1890	In ruins
Vidin Synagogue	1894	Being rebuilt

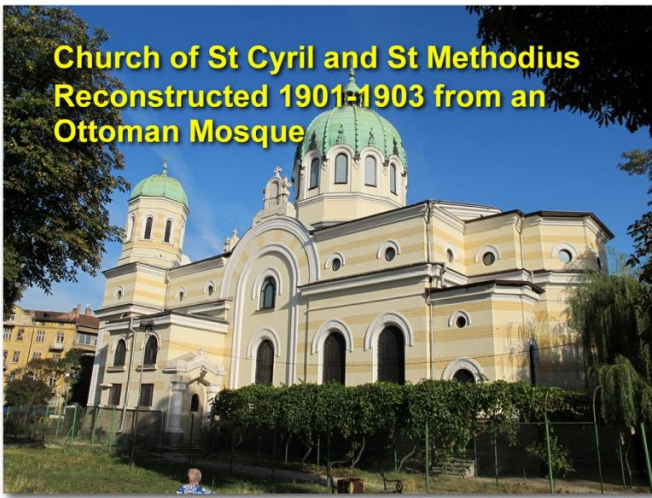
Only two still functioning.

Interior of Sofia Central Synagogue
1905-1909
Still in use

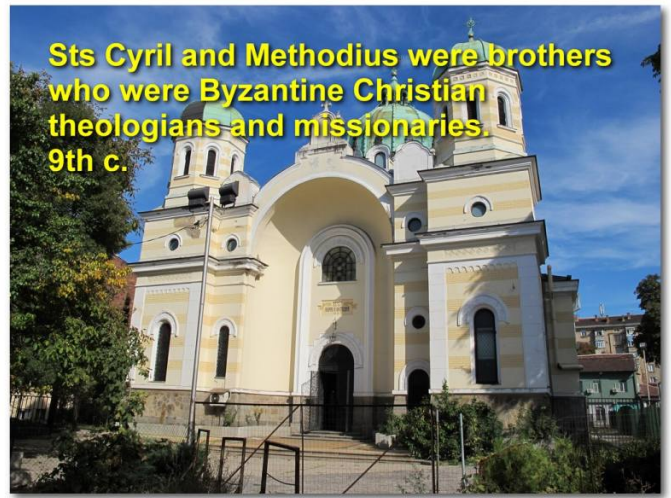


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**Church of St Cyril and St Methodius
Reconstructed 1901-1903 from an
Ottoman Mosque**



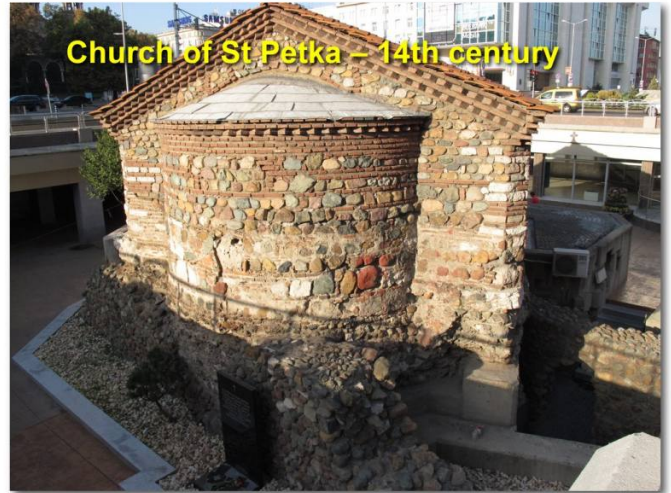
**Sts Cyril and Methodius were brothers
who were Byzantine Christian
theologians and missionaries.
9th c.**



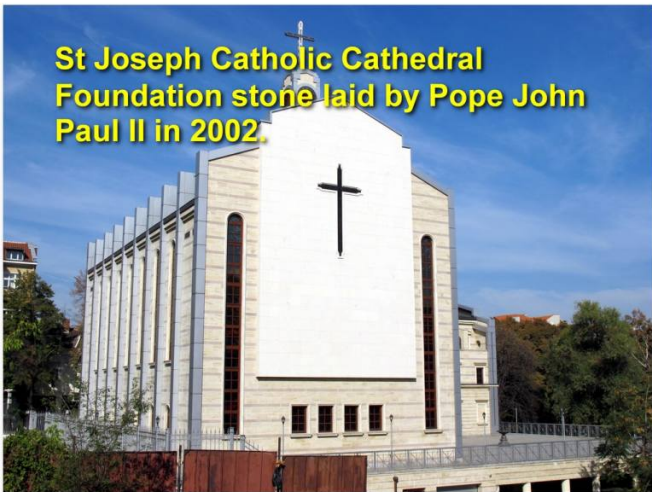
**Church of St Petka
14th century**



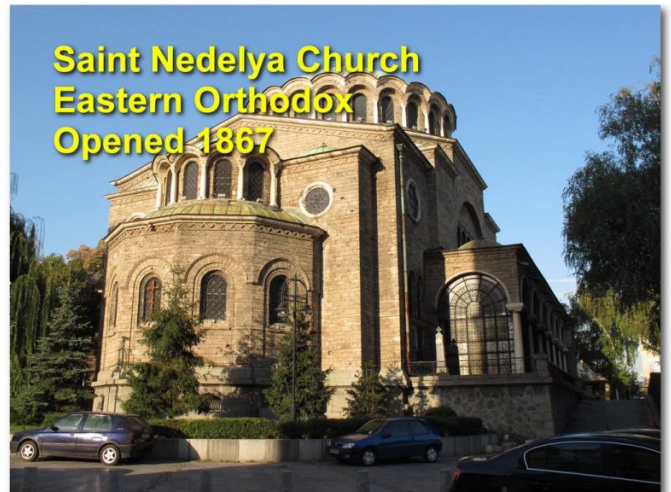
Church of St Petka – 14th century



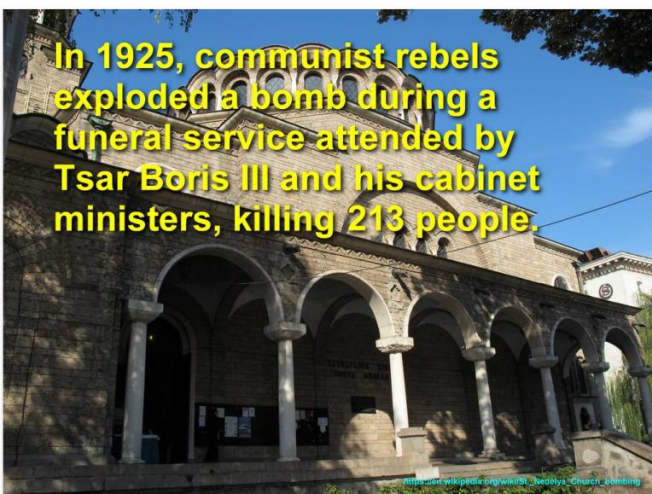
**St Joseph Catholic Cathedral
Foundation stone laid by Pope John
Paul II in 2002.**



**Saint Nedelya Church
Eastern Orthodox
Opened 1867**



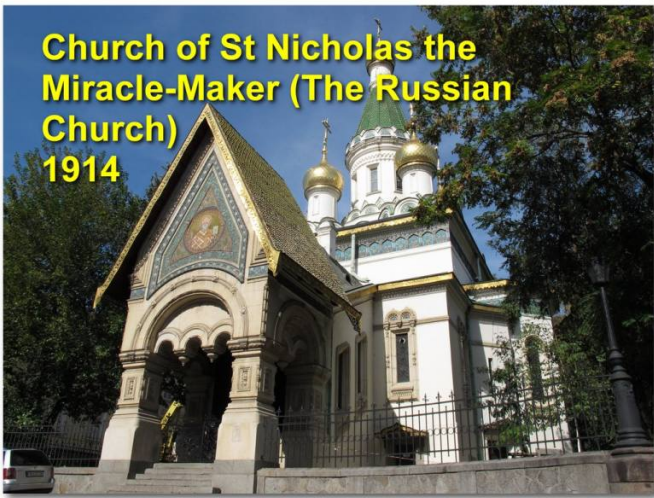
**In 1925, communist rebels
exploded a bomb during a
funeral service attended by
Tsar Boris III and his cabinet
ministers, killing 213 people.**



St Nedelya Church Interior



Not My Photo

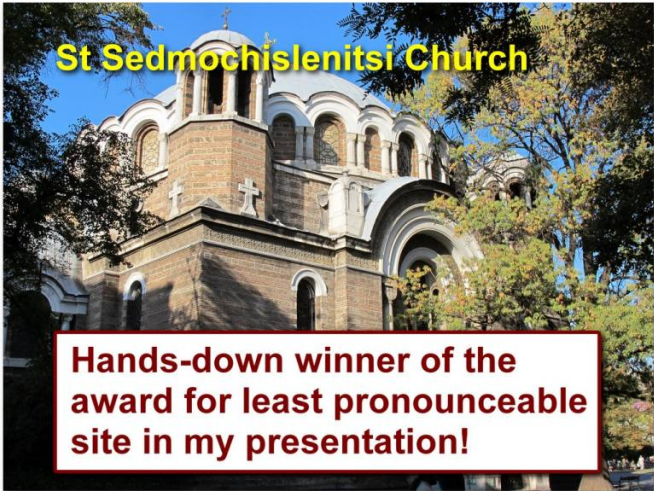


Church of St Nicholas the Miracle-Maker (The Russian Church) 1914



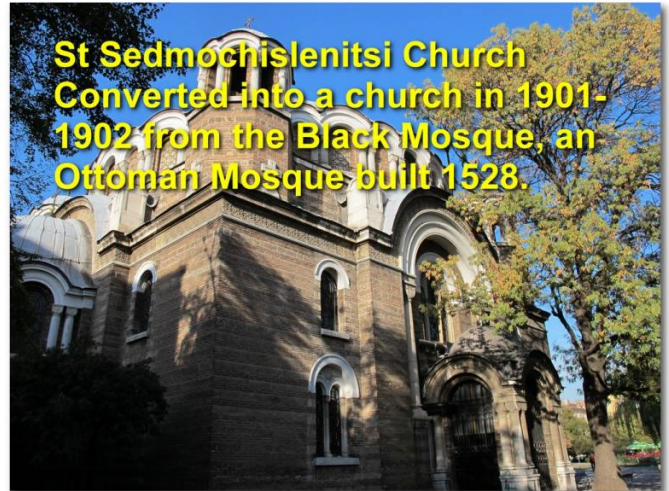
Interior of Russian Church

Not My Photo



St Sedmochislenitsi Church

Hands-down winner of the award for least pronounceable site in my presentation!



**St Sedmochislenitsi Church
Converted into a church in 1901-1902 from the Black Mosque, an Ottoman Mosque built 1528.**



Nezavisimost Square

Statue of St Sophia – goddess-protector of the city.



St Sophia Statue was erected in 2000 to replace a statue of Lenin removed in 1990 after the fall of USSR.



Council of Ministers Building. Council is the main executive power in Bulgaria. It consists of the Prime Minister and all the specialized ministers. Like the Cabinet in USA.



**President's Office
Council of Ministers**

**National Bank of Bulgaria
Central Bank
Like US Federal Reserve Bank**



Supreme Court of Bulgaria



**Sofia University founded 1888.
Oldest higher education
institution in Bulgaria.**



**Sofia University
Constructed 1924 to 1934.
Today around 24,000 students.**



**National Historical Museum
Bulgaria's Largest Museum**



National Historical Museum

- About 4 miles from Sofia center.
- In the former primary residence of dictator and last Communist leader Todor Zhivkov.
- 650,000 objects about Bulgarian archaeology, fine arts, history, and ethnography.
- About 10% of them are exhibited.

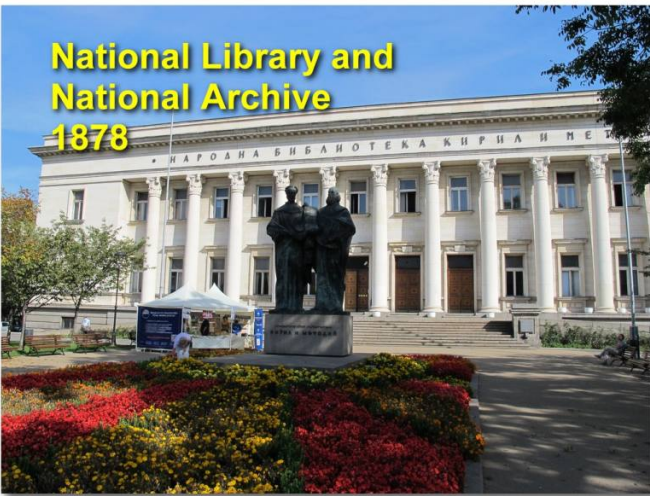
National Historical Museum



National Historical Museum



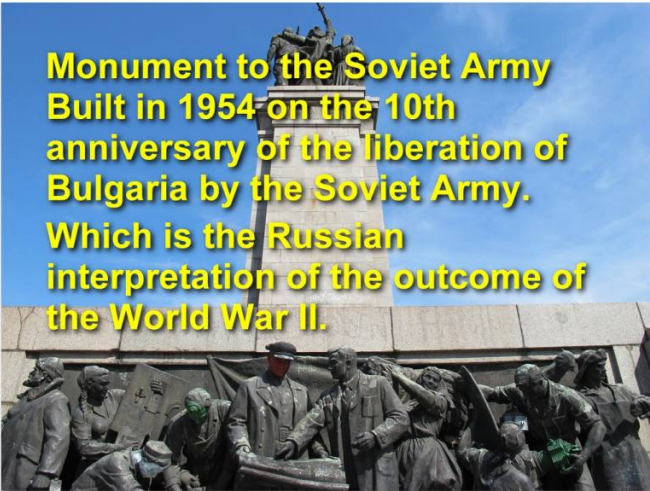
**National Library and
National Archive
1878**



**Monument to the
Soviet Army
1954.**



**Monument to the Soviet Army
Built in 1954 on the 10th
anniversary of the liberation of
Bulgaria by the Soviet Army.
Which is the Russian
interpretation of the outcome of
the World War II.**



Monument is full of heroic statues



**Leftover from Communist era.
Locals today consider
it a curiosity.**



**Gradska Gardens
Park in central Sofia**



**Higher education fair in
Gradska Gardens**



**Tzum Dept Store
Constructed 1955-1956
as part of The Largo.**



**In 1990s proved to be too large.
Converted to offices and
boutique shops.**

**Sofia Hotel Balkan
No longer Sheraton**



Postbox (Mailbox)

**Pickups:
M-F between
8 and 10 am
2 and 4 pm
Saturdays between 9 am and 1 pm**



**There are 14 McDonald's in Sofia
(March 2026)**



**Total 40 McDonald's in All Bulgaria
(March 2026)**



**Outside the central government area,
the sidewalks often need
repairs.**



**History of poor maintenance
during the Soviet era.
Still a lot of catching
up to do.**



**There are nice cafes all
around Sofia.**



**Banitsa Bulgarian Pastries -
Sweet or Savory**





Mall Food Court Lunch
 Kebapche.
 Kufteta.
 Rice.
 Potatoes
 Meatballs.
 Pepsi.
 Lev 12.5 = US\$7.



Lamb Meatball Salad



There are 14 KFCs in Bulgaria
Chicken Wrap



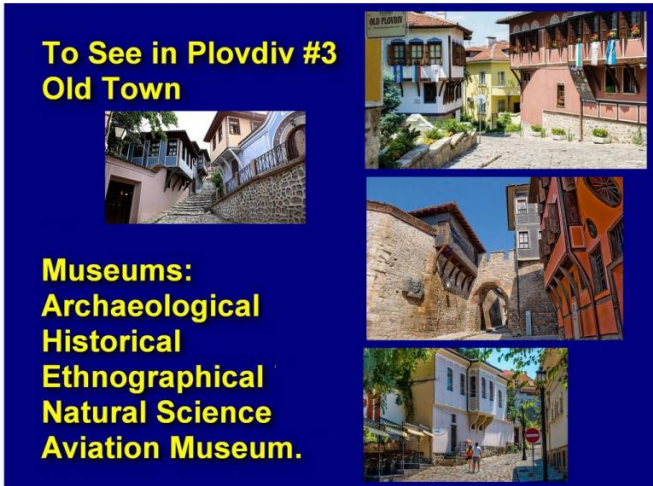
Day Trip from Sofia: Plovdiv
Better: Spend a night or two.
2 hours from Sofia by bus.



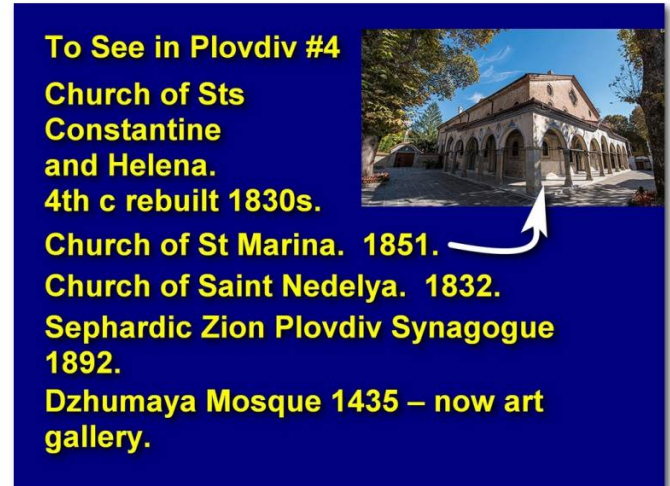
Plovdiv is an ancient and historic city. Bulgaria's second largest.
What to see in Plovdiv #1:
Roman Theatre
 1st c. AD.
Roman Odeon
 2nd c. AD.
 Small theatre.



To See in Plovdiv #2
Roman Stadium
 2nd c. AD.
 30,000 spectators.
Roman Forum
 1st c. AD.
 Shops and public buildings.
Roman Residence
 3rd c. AD.



To See in Plovdiv #3
Old Town
Museums:
 Archaeological
 Historical
 Ethnographical
 Natural Science
 Aviation Museum.



To See in Plovdiv #4
Church of Sts Constantine and Helena.
 4th c rebuilt 1830s.
Church of St Marina. 1851.
Church of Saint Nedelya. 1832.
Sephardic Zion Plovdiv Synagogue 1892.
Dzhumaya Mosque 1435 – now art gallery.



THE END
of our visit to Sofia

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