

PILGRIMAGE TOURISM IN BULGARIA

CHRISTIAN ROUTES



With the assistance of the Pilgrimage and Educational Center
„St Yoan Rilski“ at the Sofia Holy Metropolitanate

The ten pilgrimage destinations are developed by a working group including experts from the Holy Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the Bulgarian tourism industry and important cultural figures.

Photos – archive of the newspaper „24 Chasa“

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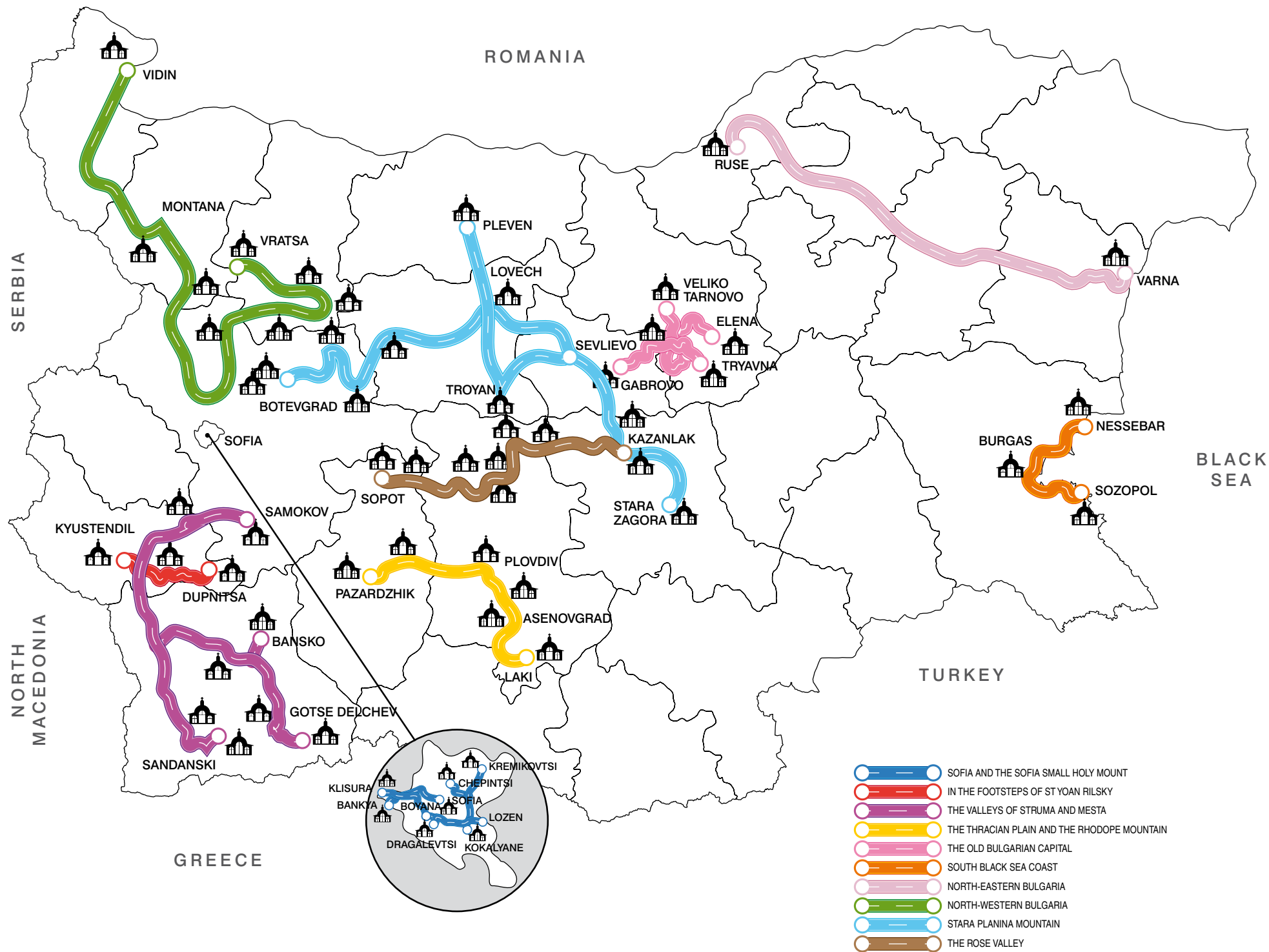
Bulgaria is a land with a millennia-old history, deep spiritual roots, and sacred places that keep alive the memory of Bulgarian holiness, literacy, and enlightenment – standing as a powerful testament to the strength of the human spirit. Every step along our pilgrimage routes is a journey not only through space but also through time – across centuries of Christianity interwoven into our culture, traditions, and national identity.

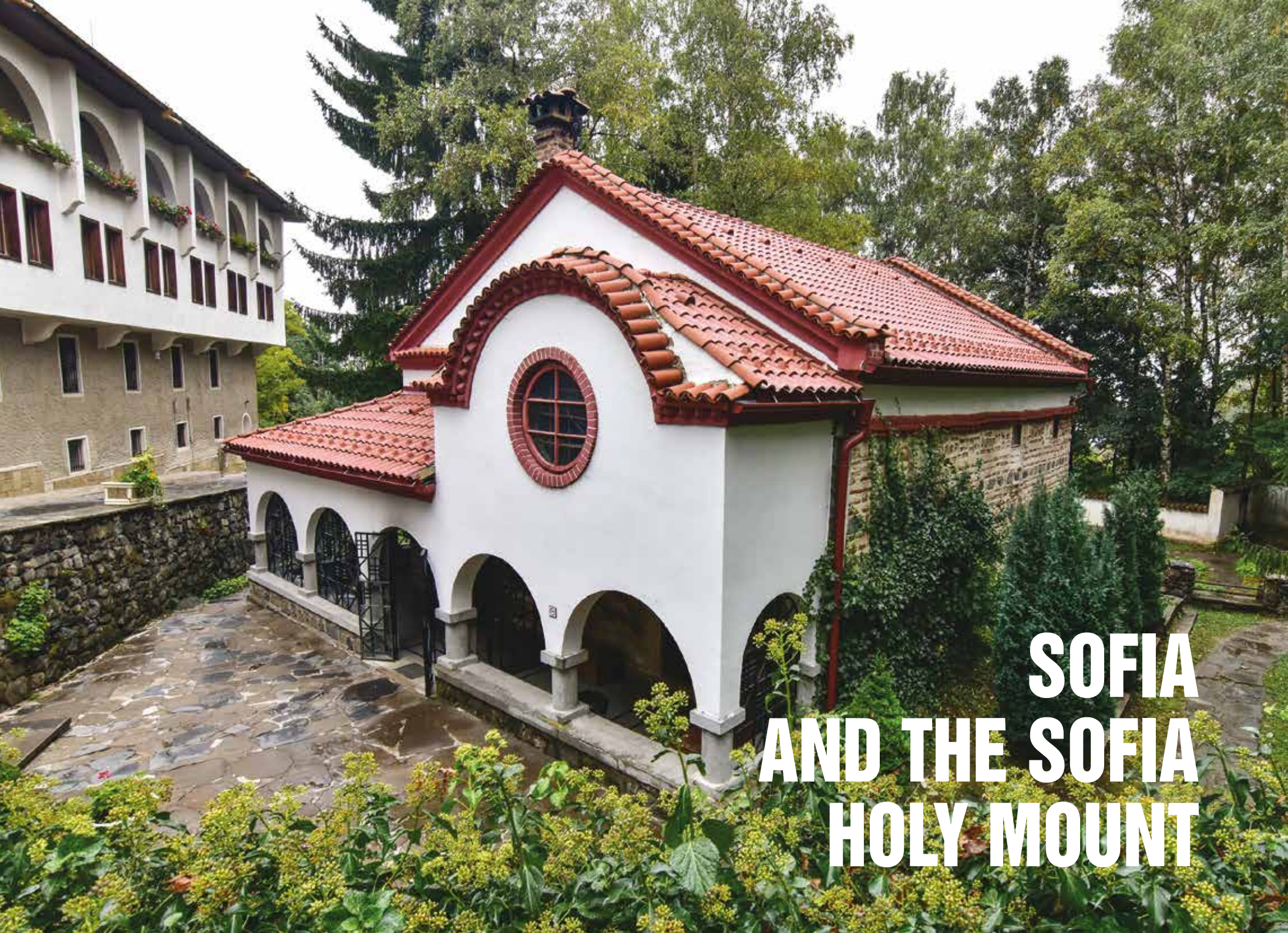
With this special edition, we invite you on a meaningful and inspiring journey – through ten regions of Bulgaria where some of the most treasured Christian shrines, monasteries, and churches have been preserved. These routes are not only a passage to history but also a path to inner peace, contemplation, and hope.

Pilgrimage tourism is more than an encounter with cultural and spiritual heritage – it is an opportunity for inner reflection, deeper understanding, and a return to our roots. We believe that Bulgaria's Christian routes deserve to be discovered, experienced, and shared. That is why the Ministry of Tourism actively works to promote them – so they may reach more people, both from Bulgaria and around the world.

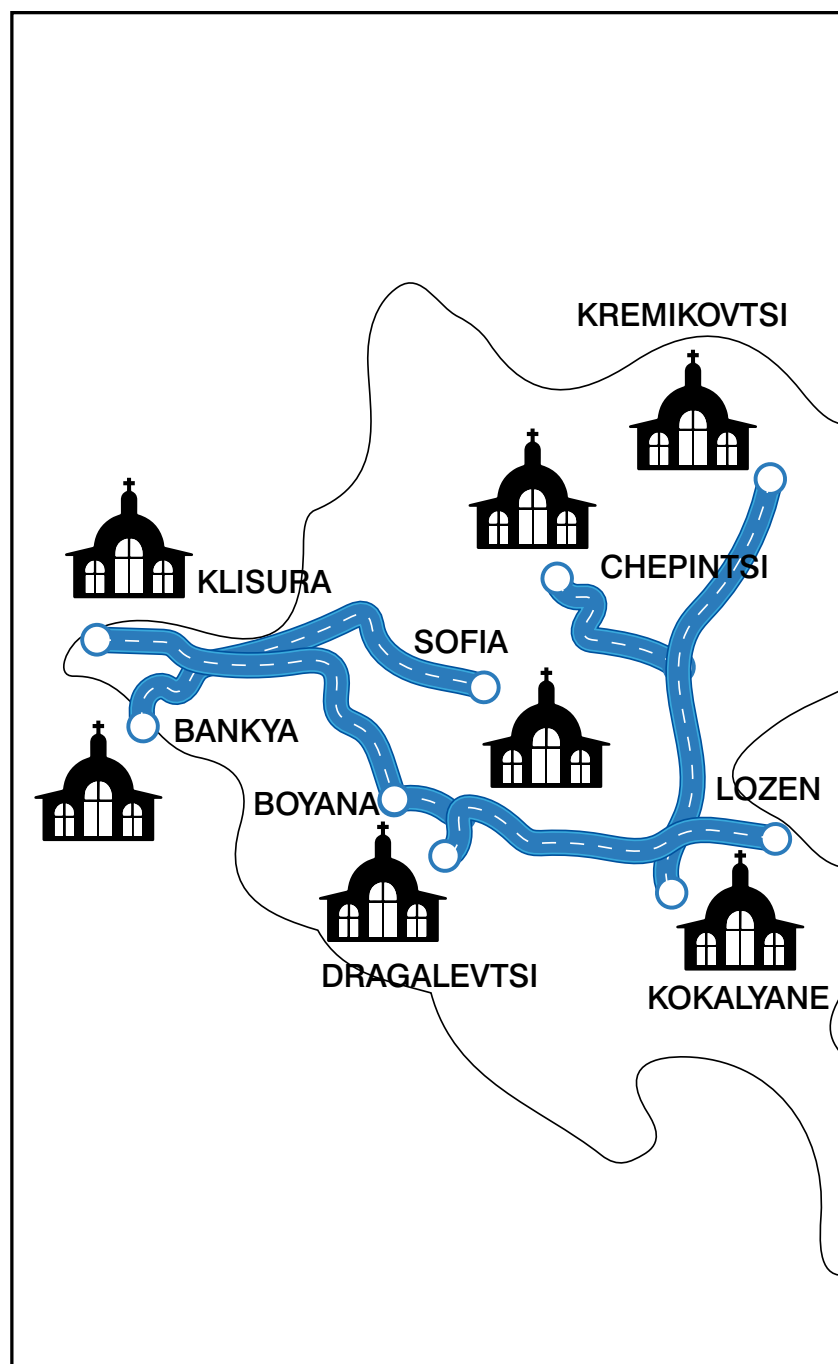
**Discover the mystery of traveling with meaning and heart.
Explore the spiritual richness of Bulgaria.**

Miroslav Borshosh
Minister of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria





SOFIA AND THE SOFIA HOLY MOUNT




Sofia – City of the Lord’s Wisdom

Named after Sophia – the Wisdom of God, the modern capital of Bulgaria is one of the oldest settlements in Europe. Located on the ancient Roman road *Via Militaris*, the city was of great strategic importance for Ancient Rome and for the spread of Christianity. The oldest remains of residential buildings on its territory date from the 6th millennium BC. The city, which originated with the name Ulpia Serdica, was enlightened in Christianity as early as the 1st century. The first enlightener is considered to be St Clement I, Pope of Rome. Sofia gave Christianity many saints and was also the site of the Council of Serdica.

In the centre of today’s city, within a very short distance, are located many pilgrimage sites.

 **The Late-antiquity fortress of ancient Serdica.** The city was built in 176–179 under the joint rule of the Roman emperors Marcus Aurelius and his son Commodus. Serdica reached its greatest prosperity during the reign of Emperor Constantine I the Great (306–337). He often stayed at his residence in Serdica and liked to say, „Serdica is my Rome“. It is a known fact that Constantine wanted to make Serdica his capital.

 **The Church of St Nedelya** is a cathedral church of the Sofia Holy Metropolis. It holds the **imperishable relics of the Serbian ruler St King Stefan Milutin and the wonderworking icon of St Virgin Mary**, presented by General Gurko in honour of the liberation of Sofia from Ottoman rule. On April 16, 1925, the church was partially destroyed in a communist terror attack.



Saint Nedelya Cathedral




The colonnade of the Church St Petka Stara in Sofia


Detail of the frescoes in the Rotunda St George the Victorious




The Rotunda St George the Victorious

The rebuilt church was solemnly consecrated on 7 April 1933. On its south side, near the side altar door, the Bulgarian Exarch Joseph I is buried.

 **The Church of St Petka Samardzhiyska** (of the Saddlers) is a partially dug into the ground building made of bricks and stones with walls up to one meter thick. It was erected in the 11th century on the remains of an ancient building (probably dating from the 3rd–4th century). It is one of the few completely preserved medieval churches in Sofia. It is dedicated to the Great Martyr Paraskeva of Iconium (Tarnovo). The frescoes inside are painted in three pictorial layers during the 14th, 15th, and 16th centuries.

 **The Church of St Petka Stara** (Venerable) is part of the building complex of the Sofia Holy Metropolis. It was built between 1241 and 1257. In its oldest section, the remains of the late antique palace complex of Constantine I the Great have been discovered. In the temple, relics of St Paraskeva (Petka) of Epivates and the holy martyr Terapontius of Sofia are venerated. A part of the tree on which he was hanged is kept in the church. A holy well is built into the building.

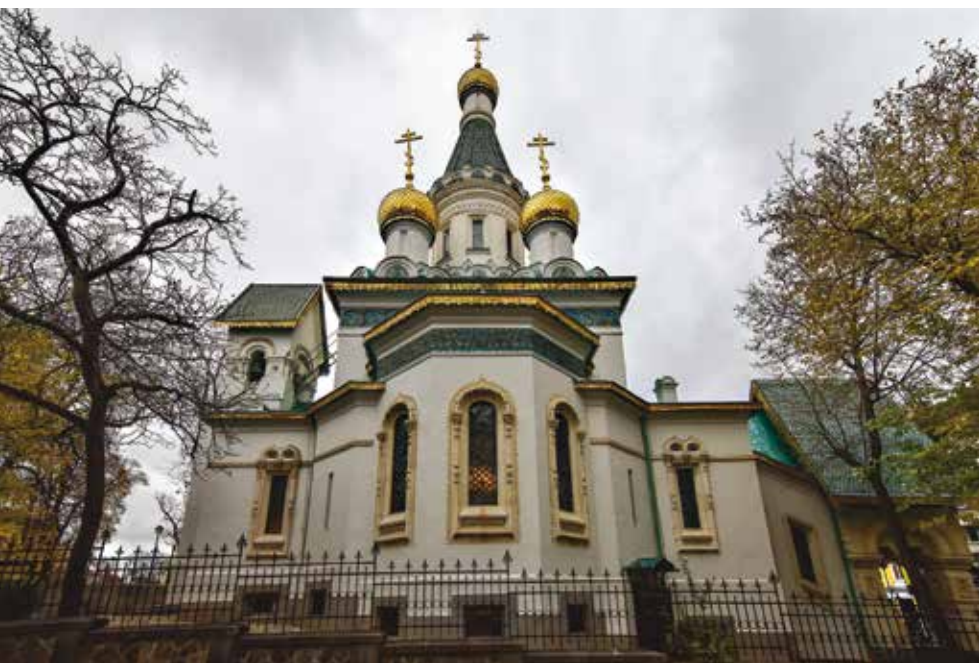
 **The Temple of St George the Victorious (the Rotunda)** is the oldest architectural monument in Sofia, still in use today, and is the only preserved building in the city from the time of the Roman Empire. It is assumed that it

was part of the palace complex in the city centre from the beginning of the 4th century. Later, it was converted into a church and painted with frescoes several times, the most significant of which date from the 10th to 11th centuries. The oldest surviving image is a magnificent head of an angel. It is part of a larger composition on the dome of the church, featuring figures of eight giant angels with outstretched wings above prophets of „superhuman“ stature and biblical scenes. The preserved head impresses with its graceful forms and expressive eyes. These frescoes are believed to date from the 10th–11th centuries – the Golden Age of Bulgarian culture during the First Bulgarian Kingdom.

During the 15th–16th centuries, the temple was a metropolitan cathedral, and the relics of St King Stefan Milutin were kept there, and in 1469, the relics of St Yoan Rilski (for one week). In the church are parts of the holy relics of **St George the Victorious, St Theodosius the Great, the Innocents of Bethlehem, St Nicholas of Myra, St Anthony the Great, St Athanasius the Great, St Euthymius the Great, St Sergius of Radonezh, St Barbara**, etc. In the Church is also buried Saint George of Kratovo.

✙ **The church of St Nicholas the Wonderworker** is an ancient Orthodox church located in the centre of Sofia. It was built on the ruins of Constantine's Palace. The church was destroyed during the Second World War bombing raids on Sofia, and today's small temple was built in its place. The

The Russian Church





Detail of the facade of the Russian church St Nicholas the Wonderworker


greatest treasure and sacred object of the temple is **the wonderworking icon of St Nicholas of Myra**.

✙ **The Church of the Seven Saints (The Sveti Sedmochislenitsi Church)** was originally built as a mosque by the famous Ottoman architect Mimar Sinan in the 16th century on the remains of a medieval monastery building. The so-called Black Mosque, by locals, was used as a prison after Bulgaria's Liberation and was masterfully converted into an Orthodox church in the early 20th century. Preserved in the temple are **parts of the relics of St Clement, St Gorazd, and St Charalambos**.

✙ **The temple St Nicholas of Myra (known as The Russian Church)** is among the emblematic buildings in Sofia. Its construction began at the end of the 19th century. It was consecrated in 1914 on the eve of the First World War. The building was constructed on a plot of the Russian Imperial Diplomatic Mission. The five small domes of the church are gilded. In the crypt is **the tomb of St Seraphim Sobolev, a Sofia wonderworker**. Thousands of believers approach him in prayer for miraculous help. Hundreds of miracles have been recorded after prayers to the saint.

 **The Palace of the Holy Synod** in Sofia is a representative building of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, the seat of the St Synod and the residence of the Bulgarian Patriarch.

 **The St Sophia Church** is an early Christian Basilica dedicated to Christ as the Wisdom of God. It is located in the centre of Sofia and in the immediate vicinity of the St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral. It was built in the late 5th–early 6th century on the foundations of several older Christian temples, the oldest of which dates from the 4th century. Around the 14th century, the temple became inextricably linked with the city, most likely in relation to its dominant position over it, and the city began to be called Sofia. The St Sophia Church is the most ancient holy place in the city. During the Ottoman rule, the temple was converted into a mosque, and its frescoes were destroyed. It has been restored several times, and since the beginning of the 20th century, archaeological research has been carried out there. Early Christian tombs and floor mosaics from older temples have been uncovered in the temple's basement.

 **The Patriarchal Cathedral-Monument St Alexander Nevsky** is the largest Orthodox church in Bulgaria. It was built according to the design of the Russian architect Alexander Pomerantsev and is the most striking work

The St Sophia Church



The Patriarchal Cathedral-Monument
St Alexander Nevsky



The chandelier in the Cathedral-Monument St Alexander Nevsky

of the Neo-Byzantine architectural style. Construction lasted from late 1904 to 1912. The cathedral was erected in gratitude to the people of Russia for the liberation of Bulgaria from Ottoman rule and is dedicated to the heavenly patron of the Russian Emperor Alexander II. The northern Holy Seat is dedicated to Saints Cyril and Methodius, and the southern one to St. Tsar Boris I the Baptizer. The main icons are the work of Viktor Vasnetsov, while Ivan Mrkvička, Stefan Ivanov and others took part in the painting of the temple. The crypt holds the richest collection of Orthodox icons in Bulgaria. In the temple are exposed for pilgrimage **parts of the relics of St Alexander Nevsky and St Seraphim of Sarov**. In the cathedral, there are also two **wonderworking copies of icons of the Blessed Virgin Mary – Axion estin from Karyes and St Mary Panthasa from Athos**.



The staircase of the bell tower in the Church-Monument St Alexander Nevsky

The Sofia Small Holy Mount

Being spiritually and materially developed, Sofia was a favourable place for the spread of monasticism. A ring of over 40 monasteries shaped near the city, forming the so-called Sofia Small Holy Mount. It dates to early Christianity. In some of the monasteries, can find wonderful examples of early Christian art – frescoes, architecture, and icons.

🏰 **The Boyana Church of St Nicholas and St Pantaleon** is one of the cultural symbols of Bulgaria, and in 1979 it was included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. The Boyana Church is located at the foot of Vitosha Mountain, in the Boyana district, 8 km from the Sofia city centre. The original small church dates back to the 10th–11th century. In the 13th century, a two-storey family church was added to it. Its lower floor is dedicated to St Nicholas, and the upper floor is a small chapel dedicated to St Pantaleon. The rebuilding was the work of Kaloyan, *sebastocrators* (feudal lord) of Sofia, who was also the custodian of painting in 1259. Additional frescoing was done in the 14th and 16th–17th centuries, and in the mid-19th century a new antechamber was added. Valuable medieval manuscripts have been found there: the Boyana Gospel from the 12th–13th century, the Obituary

The Boyana Church



The frescoes in the Boyana Church

List of the Bulgarian Kings, Patriarchs and boyars, written in the 16th–17th century, etc.

🏰 **Dragalevtsi Monastery of the Holy Mother of God of Vitosha** is located 1 km away from the Sofia district Dragalevtsi. For the first time, its name is mentioned in the Vitosha goldseal charter of the Bulgarian Tsar Ivan Shishman (issued probably between 1378 and 1382). It notes that the


Dragalevtsi Monastery of the Holy Mother of God of Vitosha





Dragalevtzi Monastery


monastery was founded during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander around 1348 and was part of the group of monasteries that emerged in the 14th century and was called Vitosha Mala Sveta Gora. In 1382, the monastery was burnt down and became desolate. It was rebuilt in the second half of the 15th century. It was an important literary centre in the Sofia region, it had its own scriptorium and a church school. In present days, the Dragalevtzi Monastery of the Holy Mother of God of Vitosha consists of a church, residential and farm buildings. From the old monastery complex, the partially dug into the ground church from 1476 has been preserved.


 **Kremikovtsi Monastery of St George Victorious** is 3 km north of the neighbourhood of Kremikovtsi in the pine forest at the foot of the Balkan Mountains. It was founded during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander (1331–1371). A clerical inscription states that in 1493 the monastery church was rebuilt and painted with funds from the local boyar Radivoy. From the same period, the Kremikovtsi Gospel (1497) and an icon of Christ Pantocrator, which is kept in the crypt of St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral, have survived. The monastery used to preserve relics of St George of Kratovo; there used to be a rich library with valuable manuscripts. In the early 20th century, a new, larger





Kremikovtsi Monastery
of St George Victorious

domed temple called Shroud of Mother of God was built. The old church has been excellently restored, and the abodes are currently being restored. The most remarkable feature of the monastery today is the frescoes from 1493 in the old church. They present a fine example of post-Byzantine art.

 **The Divotino Monastery of the Holy Trinity**, founded in the 10th century, is one of the oldest and best-preserved monasteries, not far from Sofia. Among the locals, it became known as the Royal Monastery because of King Ferdinand's frequent visits. The oldest building of the monastery is the old church dedicated to the Holy Trinity. Part of the monastery complex is also the only church in Bulgaria dedicated to the Seventy Apostles.

 **The Klisura Monastery of St Petka** is located a few kilometres northwest of Bankya on high ground with a magnificent view of the Sofia field and the Vitosha Mountain. It originated in the 13th century as the humble dwelling of unknown monks. The monastery is known for the fact that in 1954, there settled abbess Maria Dochtorova – one of the hidden spiritual gems of the Sofia Small Holy Mount. Having started her life journey from Russia, she passed through Romania, Yugoslavia and Albania to reach the Klisura Monastery, where she was laid to rest. Her grave is located to the right of the church.

 **The German Monastery of St Yoan Rilski** is located in the Lozen Mountain, close to the villa area of the village of German. It was founded on one of the places where St Yoan Rilski resided in the 10th century. The monastery was mentioned in 1469 in connection with the transfer of the relics of St Yoan Rilski. It continued to operate in the following centuries. Affected by the Kirdzhalis (Ottoman bandits) at the end of the 18th century, the monastery was renovated in 1818, when a small church was built. The modern temple was built in its place in 1885. The monastery was taken over by the Athonite Zograf Monastery, which still manages it through a representative. The monastic statutes of Athonite monks are observed.


 **The Lozen Monastery of St Spas** (Holy Ascension of God) is located on the slopes of Lozen Mountain, about 5 km from the village of Lozen in the Sofia Province. The monastery was built during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. In 1382, it was destroyed along with the Urvich fortress. It was rebuilt in the 17th century and destroyed again in the 18th century. Its last restoration was in 1881, when, in the ruins, the Church of Holy Ascension of God was built. Currently, it is a female monastery, and it is also famous for





The bells of the Church-Monument St Alexander Nevsky



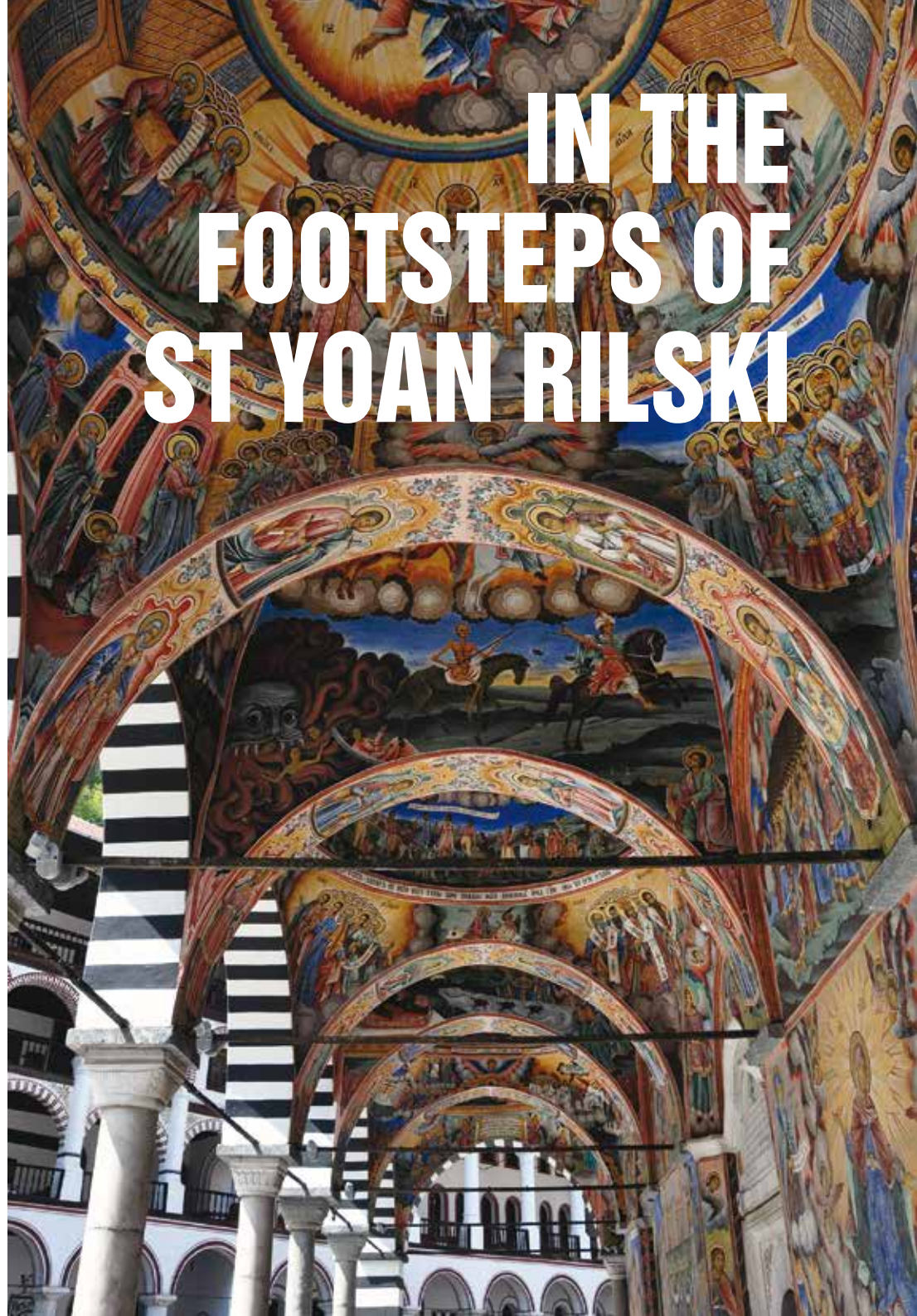
the fact that on its walls the most Bulgarian saints are depicted, as well as saint warriors.

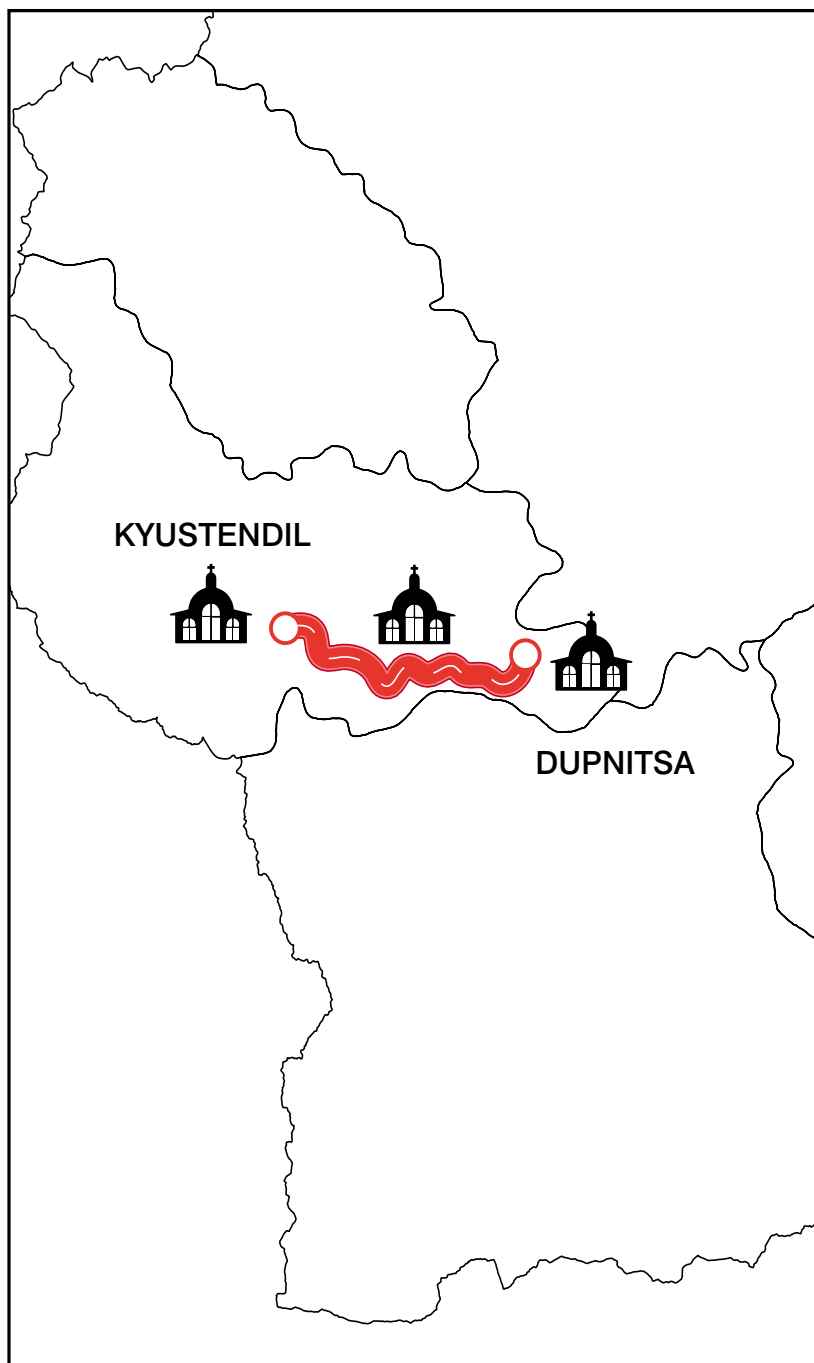
 **The Lozen Monastery of Sts Peter and Paul** is located in the same area. Dating from before the 10th–11th century, it was destroyed during Ottoman rule. At the beginning of the 20th century, a small chapel was built in its place, where Tsar Boris III liked to visit when he stayed at the nearby Vrana residence. In 1988–1989, a small church was built there, while construction of the monastery abode began in 1994–1995. The new Church of Holy Trinity was consecrated in 2005.

 **The Obradovtsi Monastery of St Mina** is one of the most important pilgrimage centres of the Sofia Small Holy Mount. It is located in the Sofia field, about 2 km northeast of the former village of Obradovtsi (today Benkovski neighbourhood). It was founded in the 11th century and had about 40 chapels, monastery buildings, and a spiritual school, a metochion in Athos, Greece. The restoration of the monastery began in 1927, and construction work continued in 1942–1945. The chapel of Sts Cosmas and Damian the Silverless was also restored. After the fall of Communism in 1989, the monastery gained great popularity mainly because of the wonderworking icons of St Mina and St Phanourios, with whose intercession many miracles took place. Construction continues to this day. A whole complex of buildings and chapels appeared, including a new domed church dedicated to St Nicholas, which was recently painted with beautiful frescoes in the Byzantine style.

 **The Eleshnitsa Monastery Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary** is located at the foot of Mount Murgash, about 4 km from the village of Eleshnitsa. It originated in the 15th century, records of it have been discovered from the 16th century, and in the 15th–18th centuries it was a lively literary centre. Manuscripts of the Four Gospels of Ivan Alexander, Psalter, Psalms, Menaion and an Octoechos are preserved. The 16th-century church survives, painted with three layers of frescoes by local artists, many of which have survived. The iconostasis with icons from the 18th and early 19th centuries has also survived. In recent years, the church has been successfully restored.


IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF ST YOAN RILSKI





St Yoan Rilski – the heavenly patron of Bulgaria

St Yoan Rilski lived during the reign of three Bulgarian rulers – St Tsar Boris I (828–907), Tsar Simeon the Great (864–927), and St King Peter (910–970). He is one of the most revered saints in the entire Orthodox world. Born in the village of Skrino in 876, he followed the ways of ancient Egyptian Hesychasts. To everyone's delight, his holy relics are imperishable and rest in the main church of the Rila Monastery.

 **The Rila Monastery of St Yoan Rilski** is one of the largest monasteries in the Balkans. It is included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. It is situated in Rila, at 1100 m above sea level. The monastery is the last place where the saint resided. It was founded in the mid-30s of the 10th century by St Yoan Rilski himself and his disciples. After his death, the relics of St Yoan Rilski were buried in the monastery, but subsequently were taken to many places across Europe. They passed through Sredets, Tarnovo, and even reached Hungary. It was not until 1469 that they were returned and are still in the monastery church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary.

During the Byzantine occupation, the Rila Monastery became a pillar of Bulgarian national consciousness. With a large wave of emigrants at that time, many Bulgarians settled in the Chernigov region of Ukraine. Monks from the Rila Monastery travelled with them, carrying the right hand of St Yoan and religious books. A town was founded in his name – Rylski.

In 1334–1335, the monastery was expanded on the initiative of the Serbian boyar Hrelja Dragovol. A stone church, a defensive tower, and some buildings

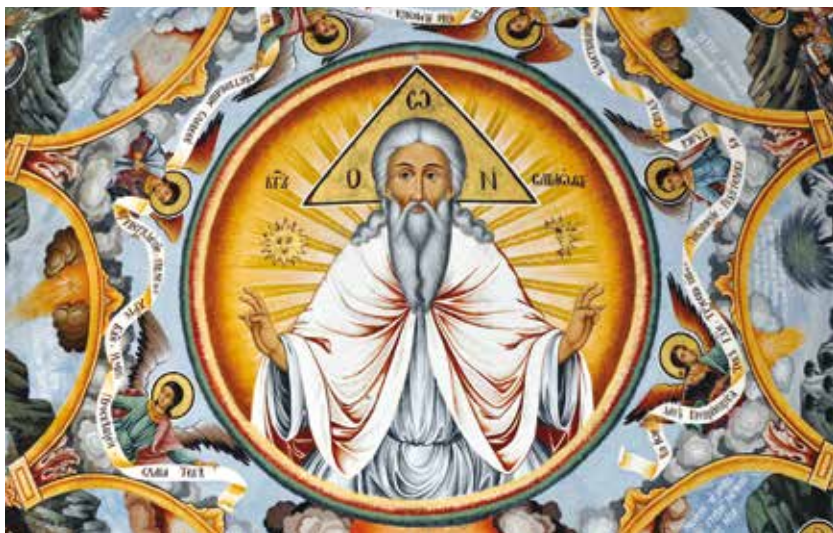


The Rila Monastery

were built then, of which only the tower survives. **The defensive (Hrelja) tower** is the oldest building in the Rila Monastery. It is five floors (23 m high), square, with an underground hideout, with the most interesting part of the tower being the chapel of the **Transfiguration of Christ** on the top floor. Its frescoes date back to the 14th century and are an extremely valuable monument of Bulgarian church art. The Rila Monastery was supported by the tsars of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and was the spiritual and cultural centre of the state. At their coronation, some of the tsars took the saint's name as their first (Ivan Asen I, Ivan Asen II, Kaloyan, Ivan Shishman, etc.). The Holy Monastery received generous donations from the Bulgarian rulers, received gifts and accolades from the Russian tsars, Vlach boyars, and Serbian clergymen. The monastery archives hold a donation charter from 1378. Saint Euthymius of Tarnovo wrote the hagiology of St Yoan Rilski around the same time.

In the 13th and 14th centuries, the Rila Monastery produced important manuscripts, magnificent works of woodcarving, highly artistic frescoes, icons, and other works of spiritual and material culture. In 1466, a treaty of mutual assistance was signed with the Russian monastery of St Pantaleon in Mount Athos. In the monastery worked Bulgarian scribes and enlighteners, such as Vladislav Gramatik, Dimitar Kantakouzenos, Spyridon,

Detail of the frescoes in the Rila Monastery



as well as Joseph Bradati and Neofit Rilski, who taught in the monastic school, among others. In the period 1834–1837, the main church, Nativity of the Virgin Mary, was built, the work of artisan Pavel Yoannovich. The most prominent Bulgarian iconographers painted the interior of the church

Detail of the frescoes in the Rila Monastery





The Cave of St Yoan Rilski in the mountains above his native village of Skrino, from which he began his monastic life

and the outer walls under the arcade with numerous tiny domes. They created 1200 compositions, made 40 large and numerous small icons. The iconostasis is the largest on the Balkan Peninsula. It was made by Atanas Teladur and his pupils in 1839–1842 and was gilded a few years after its completion. The rooms connected to the main church include four chapels located in the residential wings of the monastery. The oldest among them is the chapel in the east wing, dedicated to John the Apostle. It survived a great fire and is unchanged from 1816. One floor up in the same wing is the chapel of St Sava and Simeon of Serbia, built in 1834–1835. The chapels in the west wing are dedicated to St John the Forerunner and the Council of the Holy Archangels. In it, at the front, next to the iconostasis, are **the imperishable relics of St Yoan Rilski**. The monastery also holds the wonderworking icon of St Mary Hodegetria „The Wayshower“. According to legend, the icon was given to the monastery by the sister of Tsar Ivan Shishman, known as Mara the White Bulgarian, wife of Sultan Murad I (1319–1389). The tomb of the last Bulgarian monarch, Tsar Boris III, is also located in the Rila Monastery.

The monastery is a complex of churches, chapels, residential and farm buildings with a total area of 8800 sq. m. It is surrounded by 24-metre-high stone walls forming an irregular pentagon. The complex also includes many buildings scattered in the surroundings – metochia, chapels, outbuildings, etc. The unique Magernitsa (the monastery kitchen) is also open to visitors. The Rila Monastery houses one of the richest collections of icons from the 14th to 19th centuries. The oldest is the icon of St Yoan Rilski from the 14th century. In the monastery are kept manuscripts, old printed books, documents from the 14th to 19th centuries, and in the museum – icons, vestments, ecclesiastical utensils, antique objects (staves, weapons, coins, etc.).



The Defence (Hrelja) Tower



The Church of the Assumption
of St Yoan Rilski

Close to the Rila Monastery is **the cave of St Yoan Rilski**, where the saint spent years in fasting and prayers. Near the cave are the old house for fasting and a small church – The Assumption of St Yoan Rilski, built over the saint's grave, on the ruins of an older temple. There is a small iconostasis in the cave. A narrow tunnel at the rear leads to the top of the cliff. A hundred meters above the cave, a healing spring with holy water springs up. There is a tradition that every visitor leaves a handwritten note with a wish. It is believed that St Yoan Rilski helps the requests come true. Just above the spring is the rock on which St Yoan Rilski prayed and where Yoan was struck by Satan.



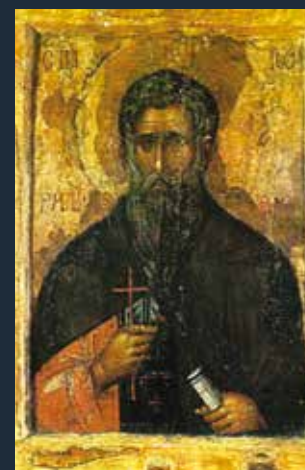
The **Rila Nunnery „Orlitsa“** is located on the right bank of the Rila River, 18 km from the Rila Monastery. It was first mentioned in the charter of Tsar Ivan Shishman (1378). In 1469, the solemn procession carrying the relics of St Yoan Rilski back from Tarnovo to the Rila Monastery spent the night there. The nunnery includes a church, residential, and farm buildings. The main church is dedicated to the Holy Apostles Peter and Paul and was

The wonderworking icon of the Holy Virgin Mary



The wonderworking icon of St Mary Hodegetria, the Wayshower, is the oldest treasure of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church. The icon's other known name is St Mary *Osenitsa* (The Dawn). It dates from the 12th century and is kept in the main church of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary in the Rila Monastery. The wonderworking image of the Holy Mother helps with severe diseases and epidemics, as well as with paralysis. The relics of 32 Christian saints, whose names are inscribed on metal plates, are placed in special recesses around the image of the Virgin Mary.

The Bulgarian saint



St Yoan Rilski was born in the village of Skrino in 876. After the death of his parents, he donated his entire inheritance to the poor and entered a monastery as a novice. Later, he left and spent 20 years of his life in a hermitage and in prayer to God. He interacted only with wild animals and fed on grasses and fruits. Even in his lifetime, he was considered a miracle worker and a holy man. Before his death, he retired into complete seclusion and made his „Testament“ (will). In it, he exhorts his followers to „keep the holy faith pure and untainted by all malice,“ and to beware of the „serpent of covetousness,“ for „covetousness is the root of all evils.“

built in 1469 by Hieromonk David, one of the three brothers who renovated the monastery. The church has preserved frescoes from the 15th century.

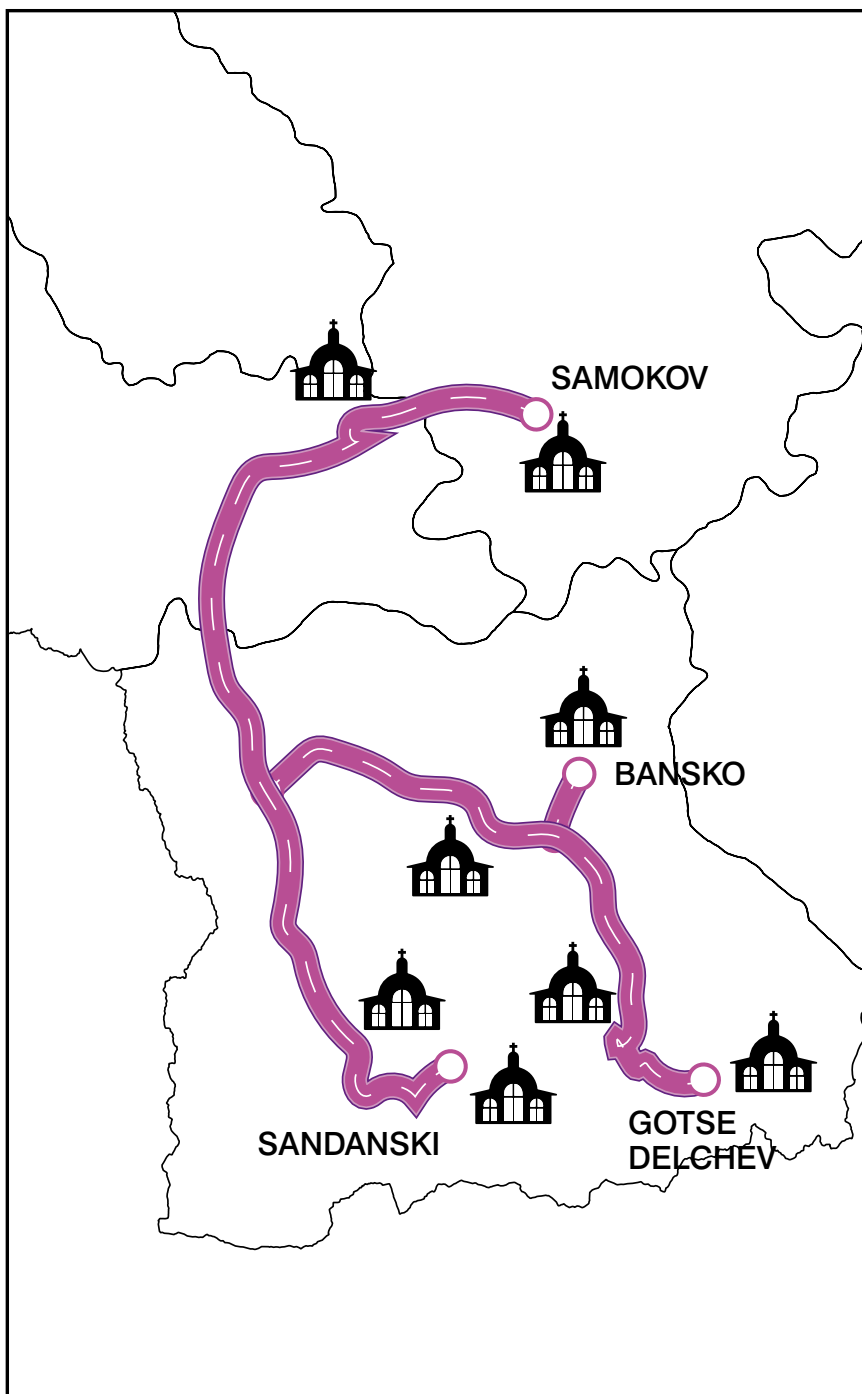
🏰 **The Rila Metochion Pchelino** is located about 4 km from the monastery. It is a complex of church, residential, and farm buildings. Its representative part is a small residential building. The Assumption of Mary was built in the 1880s. It is a small, one-naved, one-apse church with an open narthex, built of stone. Of interest are the monastery ossuary, the fasting room of St Luke, the fasting room of Shroud of the Mother of God, and the fasting room of Theodosius.

🏰 **The cemetery church St Archangel Michael** is located in the cemetery park of the town of Rila, 20 km away from the monastery. In 1995, first-class frescoes from the 12th to 13th centuries were discovered here – the oldest in the area of the Rila Monastery.

🏰 **Ruen Monastery of St Yoan Rilski** is a newly built monastery, located below Mount Ruen, next to the village Skrino – the birthplace of St Yoan Rilski. The monastery church is painted in frescoes, with rounded forms and a beautiful, gilded altar. Nearby is the cave where St Yoan Rilski lived.



THE VALLEYS OF STRUMA AND MESTA



Samokov, Sandanski, Melnik, Gotse Delchev – diocesan centres of ancient Christianity

Since Antiquity, Christianity developed thanks to spiritual centres scattered throughout the Bulgarian lands.

Samokov is nestled in the Rila Mountains close to one of the major European ski resorts. The development of iron mining, cattle breeding, and crafts led to the growth of trade during the Middle Ages. The town is also famous for its spiritual and artistic school. Samokov was an episcopal centre (1557–1907), the most prominent representative of this ancient bishopric being St Simeon of Samokov.

The Nativity of the Virgin Mary or Belyova Church is the oldest Christian church in the city. It rests on the foundations of a late-Antiquity Basilica between the 4th and 6th centuries. It bears the name of the boyar Belio, who, according to tradition, built it around 1389. The Nativity of the Virgin Mary Church was covered with earth in the 18th century. The lower layer of frescoes is from this period. In 1867–1869, the church was extensively rebuilt. The frescoes, as well as some of the icons, are the work of Nikola Obrazopisov, Dimitar Hristov, and Christo Zografski. The iconostasis was made by famous Samokov woodcarvers such as Stoycho Fandakov. From 1879 to 1891, the fountain, the watering hole, and the western part of the church – the narthex – were built. **The relics of St Simeon of Samokov** are kept here.

Samokov Monastery of the Shroud of the Mother of God was founded in 1772 as a nunnery in the building of the Hilandar Monastery in Samokov. Some of the icons in the temple are the work of Hristo Dimitrov



Samokov Monastery of the Shroud of the Mother of God



The Episcopal Basilica in Sandanski

and Dimitar Zograf. Above the entrance to the nave is painted St The Virgin Mary, patronizingly stretching her cloak over St Yoan Rilski and prominent citizens of Samokov. It is believed that the fresco was created by Zahary Zograf.

🏰 **Resilovo Monastery Shroud of the Mother of God** is a nunnery at the foot of Rila Mountain, above the village of Resilovo. In front of its entrance, there is a holy spring and a chapel of Holy Spirit. The icons of the Mother of God brought from the Zograf Monastery still perform miracles for those who come to them in faith.

🏰 The city of **Sandanski** originated in the 2nd century BC around the mineral springs. By the 6th century, the town was one of the first Christian episcopal centres of Bulgaria. Barbarian tribes sacked it at the end of the 6th century. At that time, it was named St Vrach in memory of the Sts Cosmas and Damian.

🏰 The remarkable **Episcopal Basilica in Sandanski**, built in the 5th–6th century, is a classical three-aisled basilica, impressive with its monumentality, interior architecture, and magnificent floor mosaics and frescoes. Part of its complex is a baptistery (baptismal font), an inner courtyard (atrium), and buildings associated with church life and ritual of early Christianity. The floors of the basilica are covered with multi-coloured mosaics with orna-

ments of symbols of the early Christian semiotic system – birds (Heaven), fish (Christ), and flowers (eternal life).

🏰 **The Church of St George** in Sandanski is a miniature copy of the St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral in Sofia. The area around it is designed as a place for recreation and rest.

🏰 **The Sandanski Monastery of Sts Cosmas and Damian** is located 2 km north of the Sandanski city centre, near the right shore of the river Sandanska Bistritsa. It is a Bulgarian Revival monastery, which consists of a single-aisle, single-apse church, chapels of St Demetrius and St Petka, and a residential building. There was a church there already in the 4th–5th centuries. It is believed that the two brothers, Cosmas and Damian, lived here and treated the ill people at the Miroto spring.

🏰 **Melnik** is an old Thracian town that gradually became Christian after the acceptance of the Edict of Milan. For much of its existence, it was an episcopal centre. The first basilica known today dates from the 4th century. Apart from its wonderful wine, fabulous pyramids, and stone houses, the city is famous for its ancient Christian treasures.

🏰 **The Melnik Monastery of St Virgin Mary Spiliotissa (Holy Zone, St Zona)** was built in the early 13th century on the site of a monastic hermitage in a cave (hence the name *Spiliotissa* – literally, of a cave) by the despot

St Virgin Mary Spiliotissa Monastery



Alexius Slav. The monastery is the only one in Bulgaria with the name Holy Zone (from the 18th century), the Bulgarian version of the Greek „Agia Zoni“ (the Belt of St Mary). From 1365, the monastery became a metochion of the monastery of Athos, Vatopedi Monastery, where the Chaplet of the Virgin Mary is kept. For a short time, the chaplet was on display in the Melnik monastery. Among the preserved icons is **the wonderworking icon of St Mary, called Holy Zone**, which is exposed for worship in the Church of St John the Forerunner.

⛪ The „jewel in the crown“ is the **Rozhen Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God**. It is one of the few relatively well-preserved medieval Bulgarian monasteries in its authentic form. Its founder is considered to be a follower of Hesychasm, Callistus of Melnik Livgud, the Cataphigite. In 1371, the monastery came under the authority of the Patriarch of Constantinople. In the 14th century, the monastery was given as a metochion to the Monastery of Iviron in Athos. In the main church, there are well-preserved frescoes from the 16th century, among which is the unique illustration of the hymn of the Virgin Mary „Axion Estin“. The main church of the monastery is distinguished by the unity and harmony of its interior decoration and original ensemble. The stylistic features of the iconostasis, crafted in 1732, remind



The Rozhen Monastery



The refectory of the Rozhen Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God

us of the connections of the Rozhen Monastery to the monasteries of the Holy Mountain. The great shrine of the monastery is **the wonderworking icon of St Mary Portaitissa (Keeper of Gates)**. Along with its ark, it was ordered in Melnik and painted in 1790 by the Iviron monk Jacob. It is a reproduction of the Portaitissa icon, the only one made of consecrated iron, and it is surrounded by ten small compositions in oval frames, representing events from Mary's life and the miracles performed by her. The wonderworking icon at the Rozhen Monastery helps with infertility, illnesses, and severe mental

The wonderworking icon from Rozhen Monastery



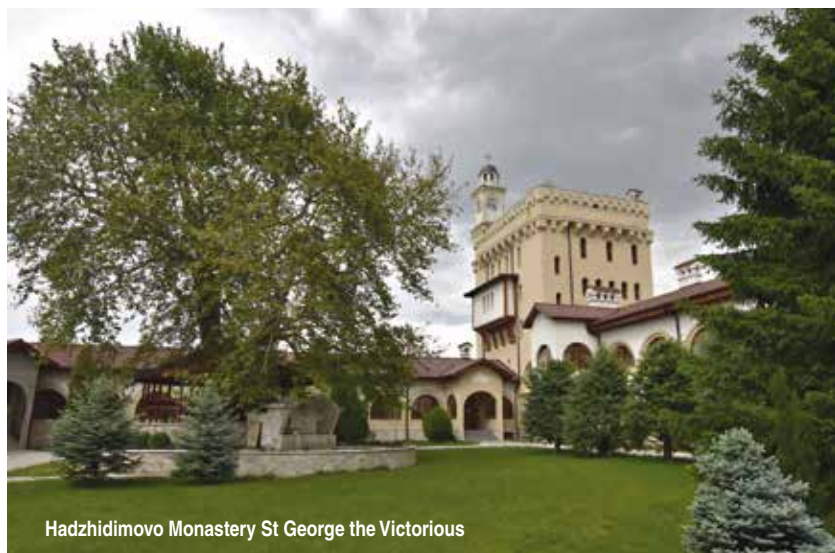
The original Panagia Portaitissa icon has guarded the gates of the Iviron Monastery, and hence the name Keeper of Gates. The Bulgarian reproduction was created by the monk-zoographer Jacob of Iviron on commission of the leatherworking esnaf (guild) in Melnik. The icon can be seen in the Church of the Nativity of the Mother of God in the Rozhen Monastery. Unlike the other copies, the one in Rozhen Monastery is made of consecrated iron. The icon is surrounded by ten small compositions depicting its miracles.

conditions, as well as oncological diseases. The dining room with frescoes from the 16th century and the Ossuary of the monastery from 1597 deserve great attention. In Ossuary, there are unique frescoes of the life of St John the Baptist as the forerunner of monasticism. The cycle of 12 scenes is one of the earliest and most complete in monumental painting in the Balkans.

🏰 The town of **Gotse Delchev** is the successor of the ancient town of Nicopolis ad Nestum, which was founded in the 2nd century AD by the Roman Emperor Trajan. For centuries, the town was known by the name Nevrokop. Diocesan lists mention it as the archiepiscopal seat until the 11th century. Remains of a fortress and a settlement dating back to the 9th–10th centuries have been found near the modern town.

🏰 **The Cathedral Church of St Cyril and Methodius and St Elijah the Prophet** is located in the Gotse Delchev city centre. It was built between 1904 and 1907. Later, a four-floor bell tower was added and completed in 1914. In 1934, the remains of the Iviron Metropolitan Makarios of Nevrokop were laid to rest next to it. The temple preserves 75 valuable icons, the work of masters of the Bansko Iconography School.

🏰 **The Church of the Assumption** in Gotse Delchev is remarkable for its extremely valuable iconostasis, which impresses with its beautiful images and masterful carvings. In the temple, there are many valuable small icons from the Bulgarian Revival.



Hadzhidimovo Monastery St George the Victorious



The tower of Hadzhidimovo Monastery St George the Victorious



The fountain in front of the Holy Trinity Church in Bansko

✚ **The Revival Church Assembly of St Archangels Michael and Gabriel** is in the southwestern part of Gotse Delchev. The temple is the oldest in the Gotse Delchev municipality. The ancient church was built in 1809–1811 on the site of an older Christian temple. Today, the church preserves a valuable iconostasis, a carved ceiling, and icons from 1881 and has the status of a monument of culture of local importance.

✚ **The Nevrokop Monastery of St Holy Mother Life-Giving Source** is located in the Southern Pirin Mountains, about 2 km southwest of Gotse Delchev. The modern monastery was built on the foundations of an older monastery, of which columns, capitals, and fragments have been preserved.

✚ **Hadzhidimovo Monastery of St George the Victorious** is very interesting in terms of architecture. It is situated on a hill about 15 km south-east of Gotse Delchev, to the south of Hadzhidimovo (previously called Singartia). The monastery is the third largest in southwestern Bulgaria after the Rila and Rozhen monasteries. It was built on an old Christian sanctuary in 1864 and, after being plundered, was rebuilt in the years between 1921 and 1965. Only the wonderworking icon of St George has survived, and it was presented for worship in the newly built temple in 1980.

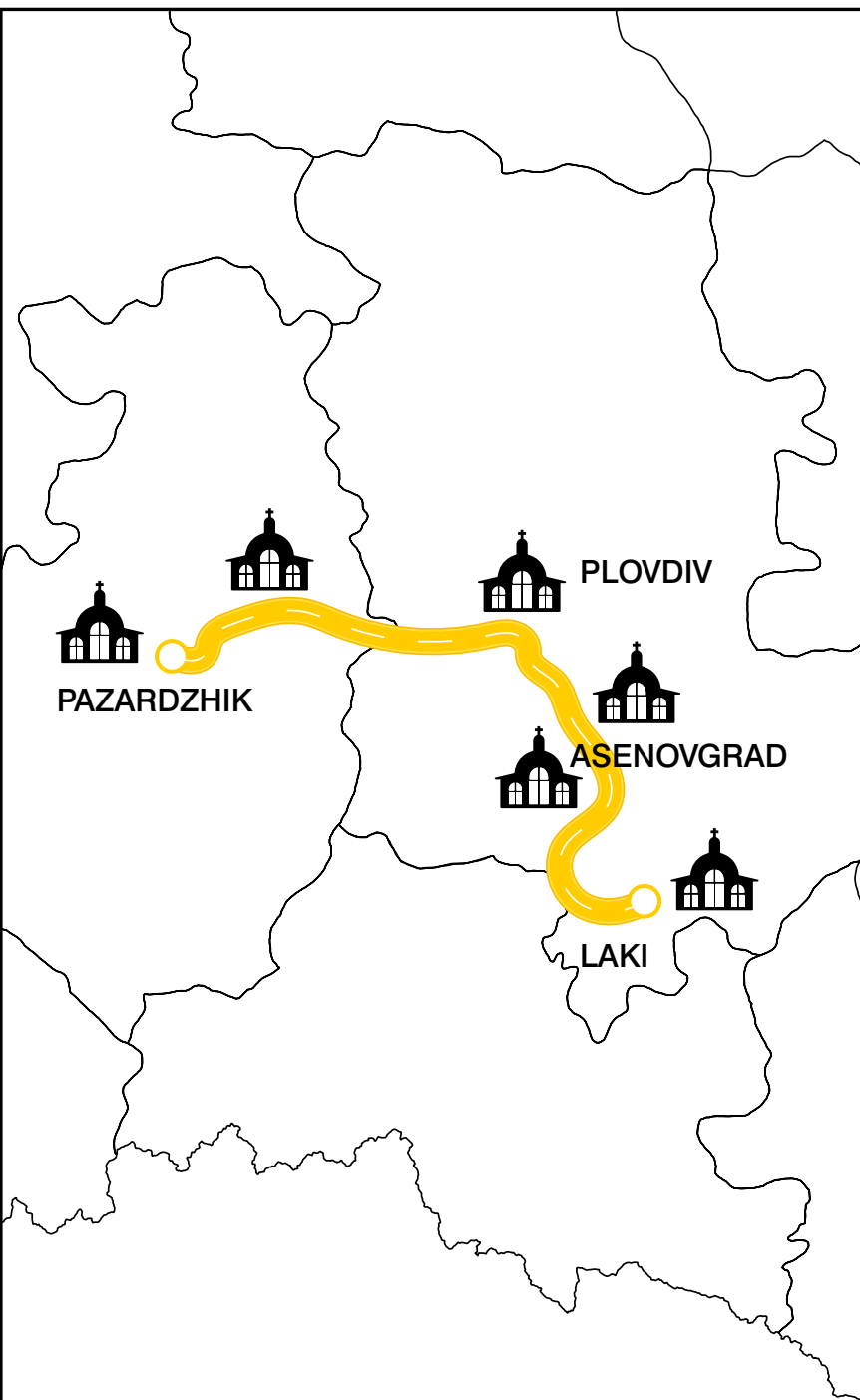


Bansko – the Holy Trinity Church

✚ At the head of the remarkable Orthodox temples in the resort town of Bansko is the **Church of the Holy Trinity**. The temple complex has been declared a monument of national cultural importance. Together with its 30-meter-high bell tower, the church is one of the symbols of the town. It is one of the largest Revival churches built in the Bulgarian lands. Its construction lasted from 1832 to 1835, while the bell tower in the courtyard was built from 1862 to 1865. In 1866–1867, a clock was installed on it. The church was painted by Velian Ognev and Dimitar, Simeon and George Molerovi. The icon of the St Virgin Mary was painted by Toma Vishanov.

THE THRACIAN PLAIN AND THE RHODOPE MOUNTAINS

The Church of the Ascension in Borovo, on the road to the Krastova Gora



Ancient Monasteries and Cities in Thrace and the Rhodopes

The old *Via Diagonalis* Road carries lots of ancient history, great spiritual wealth, ancient spirit, and grace.

Pazardzhik and the surroundings

Archaeological excavations prove life in the land of Pazardzhik and its surroundings during the New Stone, Stone-Copper, and Bronze Ages.

🏛️ **The Cathedral of the Assumption of St Mary** is the oldest in the city. It is famous for its wooden iconostasis, made of boiled walnut wood with highly artistic tracery carving by made by craftsmen from Debar over ten years. It is under the auspices of UNESCO. In the church is preserved **the wonderworking icon St Virgin Mary of Pazardzhik**.

🏛️ 15 km from Pazardzhik is the village of Patalenitsa. In the Middle Ages, it was an administrative centre of great military and strategic importance for the Bulgarian state. The church of St Demetrius remains from that time. The temple was built at the end of the 12th century on the foundations of an earlier church named St Pantaleon. From the saint came the name of the village – Patalenitsa. The church is a large cross-domed building of stone and brick, remarkable for its exquisite frescoes from the 12th century. Fragments of 70 scenes and figures remain today.

🏛️ **The Batkun Monastery of Sts Peter and Paul** is located 12 km from Pazardzhik. It was founded either in the 11th or 12th century near the former fortress of Batkunion, today on the out-



The Cathedral of the Assumption of St Mary

skirts of the village of Patalenitsa. The church of the monastery is made of stone, a small, single-nave church with a beautiful iconostasis, made by masters of the Tryavna art school. The iconostasis icons were painted by the Samokov School of Art.

Plovdiv – a city with thousands of years of history and remarkable temples

Plovdiv is the oldest living city in Europe. The first evidence of permanent human presence in these lands dates back 6000 years. Over the centuries, the city has changed its name many times – Pulpudeva, Eumolpias, Philippopolis, Puldin, Trimontium, Filibe... Its rulers have also changed – Thracians, Byzantines, Romans, Slavs, Bulgarians, Crusaders, Ottomans. Each of these civilizations has left the scars of its culture. The old town has preserved the atmosphere of a Revival town – steep cobbled streets, beautiful Revival houses, and among them, remarkable Christian temples, true symbols of faith. After the Edict of Milan in 313, an episcopal basilica was built in the city, bearing the name of St Apostle Paul.

🏛️ **The Episcopal Basilica** is a three-aisled temple with a chapel and a baptistery dating from the 5th–6th century. It is a remarkable monument of early Christian architecture. The mosaics on the floor are extremely interesting. They cover an area of 700 square metres and are painted in bright colours. Most often, they depict geometric ornaments and birds.

🏛️ **The Metropolitan Church of St Martyr Marina** was first mentioned by the German traveller Stephan Gerlach in 1578. It is the temple with the largest number of bells in the city. The church museum collection holds icons from the 15th to 17th centuries, a carved cross from Athos, a Gospel with a silver setting, relics from the Renovation, and a gold-woven shroud.

🏛️ **The Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary** is in-between Jambaz Tepe and Taksim Tepe (hills). In the Middle Ages, there was a beautiful, majestic church there. The first records of its date back to the 9th–10th century. In 1371, the monastery near the church was devastated and completely destroyed. From 1844 to 1845, craftsmen from Bratzigovo erected a new large church made entirely of stone. The iconostasis is the work of masters from the Debar school. A bell tower was built next to the church in 1881. In 1930, the courtyard of the temple was considerably enlarged and shaped





Cathedral of the Assumption of Mary in Plovdiv




The Church of St Constantine and Helena

as a vast hill terrace. In honour of the 2000th anniversary of the Nativity of Christ, the temple was restored and rebuilt in its entirety.

 **The Church of St Constantine and Helena** is located in the heart of the Old Town, on the wall of the ancient acropolis, next to the eastern city gate of Hisar Kapiya. It was built on the site where the holy martyrs Severian, Memnos and 38 of their companions sacrificed their lives for the Faith. On the site in the 4th century, 30 years after their deaths, the first temple of the Lord in Plovdiv was built, dedicated to them. In its courtyard, there was a parish school, which today has been converted into an icon gallery.

 **The Church of St Nedelya** is located in the Old Town, under the Eastern Wall of the city fortress, close to the Eastern City Gate Hisar Kapiya. It was built in 1830–1832 on the foundations of an older temple. It has icons painted by Dimitar Zograf, Stanislav Dospevsky and Nikola Odrinchanin (of Odrin). The carving in the church is the work of masters of the Debar school.

 **The Church of St Paraskeva** is located at the foot of Jambaz Tepe. The history of today's small church is linked to the legend of the magnificent cathedral dedicated to St Paraskeva of Epivat, which Tsar Ivan Asen II built in Plovdiv to commemorate the transfer of the saint's relics to Veliko Tarnovo. One of the great attractions of the temple is the large altar icons by Zahari Zograf.



The Metropolitan Church of St Martyr Marina

Asenovgrad – Little Jerusalem

Asenovgrad is located on the most convenient of the passes in the Rhodope Mountains, connecting Thrace with Eastern Macedonia (today's Greece). Its history spans back millennia and is often called Little Jerusalem because of the concentration of sacred places from different eras for Orthodox Christianity. The surroundings of the town are home to 4 monasteries, 16 churches, 71 chapels, and six healing springs. The fame of Asenovgrad as a religious centre dates back to the 19th century. The nickname Little Jerusalem has gradually become an emblem of Asenovgrad and the region.

✚ **The church of St Mary Annunciation** was the first one painted by Zahari Zograf. On the feast of the Annunciation, a procession is carried out – **the wonderworking icon of St Mary, Mother of God**, is carried by hand to the Bachkovo Monastery.

✚ **The Church of St Mary Assumption** was built in the 19th century and is located in the heart of the Gorni Voden neighbourhood. It houses **the wonderworking icon of St Mother of God – Golden Apple**. The icon is

The Church of St Mary of Petrich – part of the Asen's Fortress



The Church of St Mary Assumption

famous for helping infertile parents to have children. The icon is celebrated on Akathist Saturday.

✚ **The Church of St John the Forerunner**, also known as St Jani, rises picturesquely on an inaccessible cliff on the western outskirts of Asenovgrad. In its construction, it resembles the church at Asen's Fortress. Unique frescoes from the 14th century have been preserved there.

✚ **The Church Assumption of the Virgin Mary** (also called The Deep, or Mesochora) is an ancient temple with an iconostasis dating back to 1821 and is among the finest examples of carving art. The bell tower of the temple, built in 1877, is richly painted.

✚ **The Monastery of the Saints Cyrillus and Julita of Gorni Voden** is located on the northern slopes of the Rhodope Mountains, 3 km south-



Gorni Voden Monastery of Saints Cyricus and Julita

west of Asenovgrad. The monastery was founded in the 14th century on the site of the present-day holy well. It has been repeatedly destroyed and burned down. The monastery church St Petka was built in 1850 in the style of the Bachkovo **Church Assumption of the Virgin Mary**. A valuable iconostasis has been preserved, as well as icons painted by Zahari Zograf.

The icon of the Virgin Mary in the Fish Church – Asenovgrad



The Kuklen Monastery of Sts Cosmas and Damian the Silverless

is located 2 km southwest of the village Kuklen. It was mentioned as early as the 11th century in a document about the estates of Bachkovo Monastery. It is dedicated to the brothers Cosmas and Damian, famous for their healing abilities. It preserves valuable icons from the 18th century. The temple is also famous for the healing water of the spring of St Silverless.



The Kuklen Monastery of Sts Cosmas and Damian the Silverless





The tower of the Arapovo Monastery

Frescoes in the Arapovo Monastery



🏰 **Arapovo Monastery of St Nedelya** is located next to the village of Zlatovruh (former Arapovo), 10 km from Asenovgrad. The monastery is remarkable for the beautiful tower fortress in its courtyard. It was built on the initiative of Angel Voivode and is the only completely preserved monument from the time of the haiduts in Bulgaria. It was used as a watchtower and a dwelling. The monastery dates back to 1856. It is one of the few monasteries created during Ottoman rule. A small monastic dormitory was built near an old holy well. A chapel with beautiful frescoes was later erected over the well. The Arapovo Monastery was built by Rhodope masters, headed by Stoyan Uzunov. The church is remarkable for its picturesque decoration, the work of Georgi Danchov, the Zograph, a close friend of Vasil Levski. During the Russo-Turkish War of Liberation, the monastery was burnt down but was subsequently rebuilt.

The Chapel at the Holy Well of the Arapovo Monastery



🏰 **The Asen's Fortress** was built during Thracian times. The fortress was named after Tsar Ivan Asen II, who fortified and expanded it in 1230. From the fortress remains only a two-floor stone building, which is an emblem of Asenovgrad. On its second floor is **the Church of St Mary of Petrich**.

The Bachkovo Monastery – a cradle of spirituality and monasticism from the 11th century

🏰 **The Bachkovo Monastery of the Assumption of St Mary** is a priceless treasure of Orthodox Christianity. It was founded in 1083 by two brothers, Gregory and Abbasius Bakuriani. The Bulgarian kings Ivan Asen II and Ivan Alexander were its patrons. Here, unknown talented builders have left examples of monastery and church architecture. St Patriarch Euthymius of Tarnovo was exiled to the monastery. According to local tradition, his grave is at the southern pillar in front of the western entrance of the main monastery Church of the Virgin Mary, just below the altar of the Church of the Archangels of the 12th century, where an inextinguishable candle lamp was kept until 1870. **The main Church of the Virgin Mary** was built under the abbot Parthenius in 1604 by the Bulgarian master Nicholas and was



A copy of the wonderworking icon of St Virgin Mary Eleusa (Tenderness) in the Bachkovo Monastery



The entrance to the Bachkovo Monastery



The Bachkovo Monastery

painted in 1643 by the Tsarigrad (another name for Constantinople/Istanbul) nobleman George. It was the largest temple in the Bulgarian lands before the Revival. It preserves one of the earliest carved iconostases with gilding and colouring in Bulgaria, from the early 17th century. In the temple is exposed for worship the wonderworking icon of **St Mary**, which is the work of **St Apostle Luke**. The location of the holy icon is according to the will of the depicted Mother of God and relates to its hiding and re-finding. The icon is of the „propitiation“ type and is encased in two vestments – silver and gold. The silver one bears a donation inscription from 1311. After the construction of the church in 1604, the icon was solemnly placed in it on the second day of the Resurrection of Christ. Every year, a pilgrimage is made to the area

The metasequoia in the courtyard of Bachkovo Monastery, planted in 1958 by Hieromonk Naum



of Cluviata, where the icon was discovered, in the church of St Archangels. A Passover liturgy is read there and water is blessed at the holy spring.

The old refectory is located in the preserved part of the south wing of the monastery. It was built at the same time as the main church in 1623. It is a rectangular room with a semi-cylindrical vault and an apse on the west wall, where the abbot used to sit. In the middle stands the original marble table from 1601, where the monks ate for more than three centuries. The refectory was painted by unknown Bulgarian painters in 1643 with frescoes comparable in artistic merit to the paintings in the refectory of the Monastery of Great Lavra in Athos (1535). In addition to the Last Judgement and the figures of the saint-monks, scenes from the history of the Christian Church are depicted – the seven Ecumenical Councils, which affirmed the Orthodox dogmas, condemned heretics, and defended the purity of the faith through the holy canons. The branches of the Jesse Tree – the genealogical tree of the God-man Christ, the story of Christ's Nativity, and scenes from the Akathist of the Theotokos unfold along its canopy. In the southern part of the monastery are the museum with extremely valuable exhibits and **the Church of St Nicholas** from 1840, which was recently restored. The church was entirely painted by Zahari Zograf, who left his self-portrait in the upper left corner of the narthex. On the entire east wall of the narthex is the composition „The Last Judgement“.

The ossuary church was built together with the monastery in 1083. It is a unique treasure for the whole Christian world, the oldest preserved building in the monastery and the oldest preserved of its kind in the Orthodox East. It is located about 300 m east of it, in the locality of Cluviata. It was built of quoins of bigor stone and thin bricks by order of Gregory Pakourianos Bakuriani as a resting place for his „sinful bones“. The ossuary has two floors: the first is the actual ossuary, and the second serves as a church for funeral services. The ossuary is of a type foreign to the Balkan Peninsula, imported from the Caucasus. In its marble floor, 14 niches for the bones of the monks are dug in, and further two for the bones of the founders of the monastery are under the semicircular niche in the east. The painting on the first floor relates to the day of the general resurrection and the Last Judgement. The second floor has better-preserved frescoes from 1083 of exceptional artistic value without parallel in the whole of Christian history, signed by the iconographer John Iveropoulos.

Krastova Gora keeps a piece of the Cross of Christ



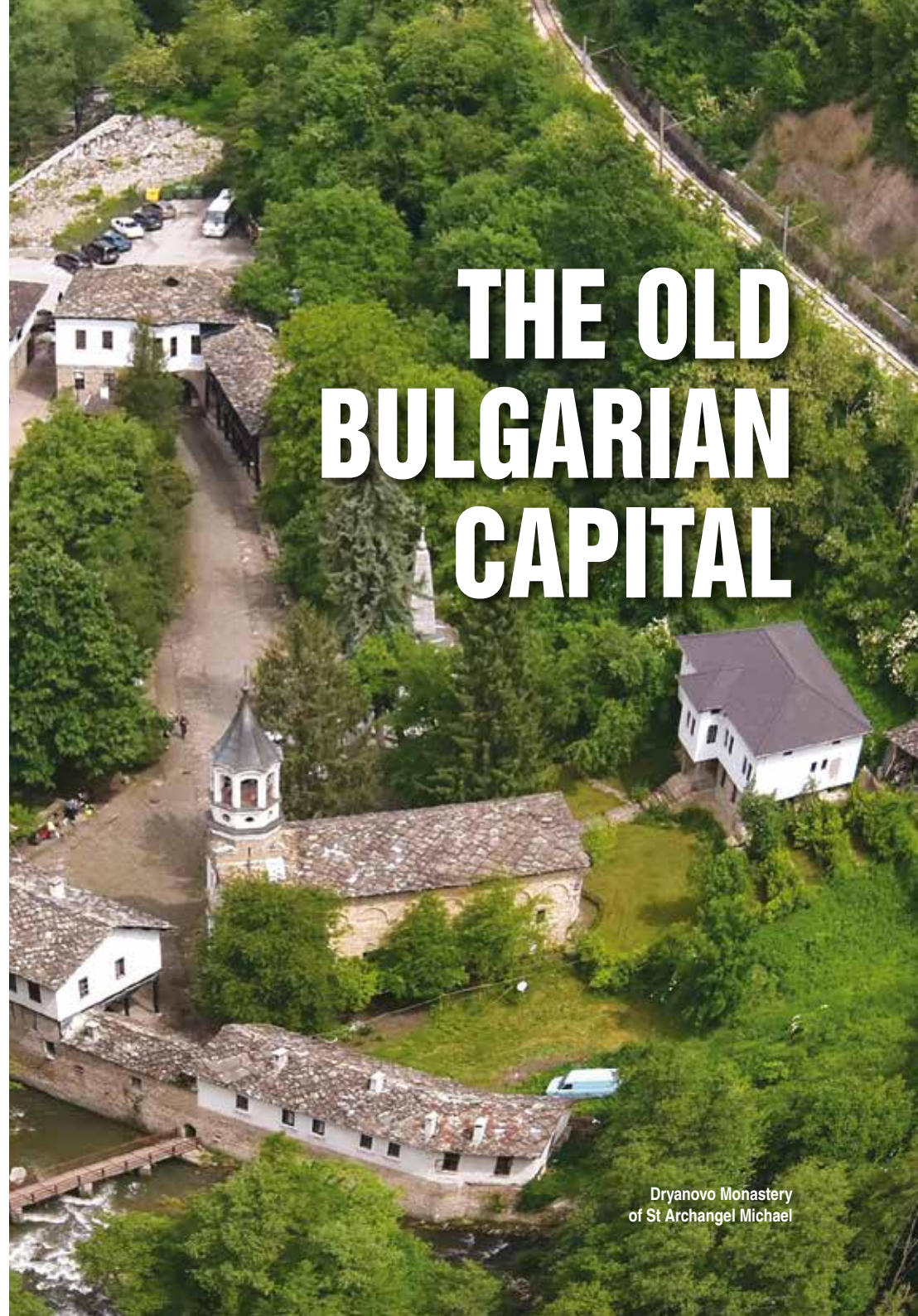
Krastova Gora

of the Shroud of Mother of God. Along an alley to the top of a small hill are 12 chapels erected in honour of the 12 apostles. The path between them leads to the Holy Cross, on which the laity place their garment, pray for health and deliverance from sickness.

In 1936, Tsar Boris III placed a cross at this spot in gratitude for the recovery of his sister Evdokia, who suffered from epilepsy. The cross weighed 33 kilograms and was stolen by bandits who cut it into three pieces. Shortly thereafter, two of them died, and the third repented and sent a note confessing his sin. Even today, one can see the places where that cross was cut and how it was welded again.

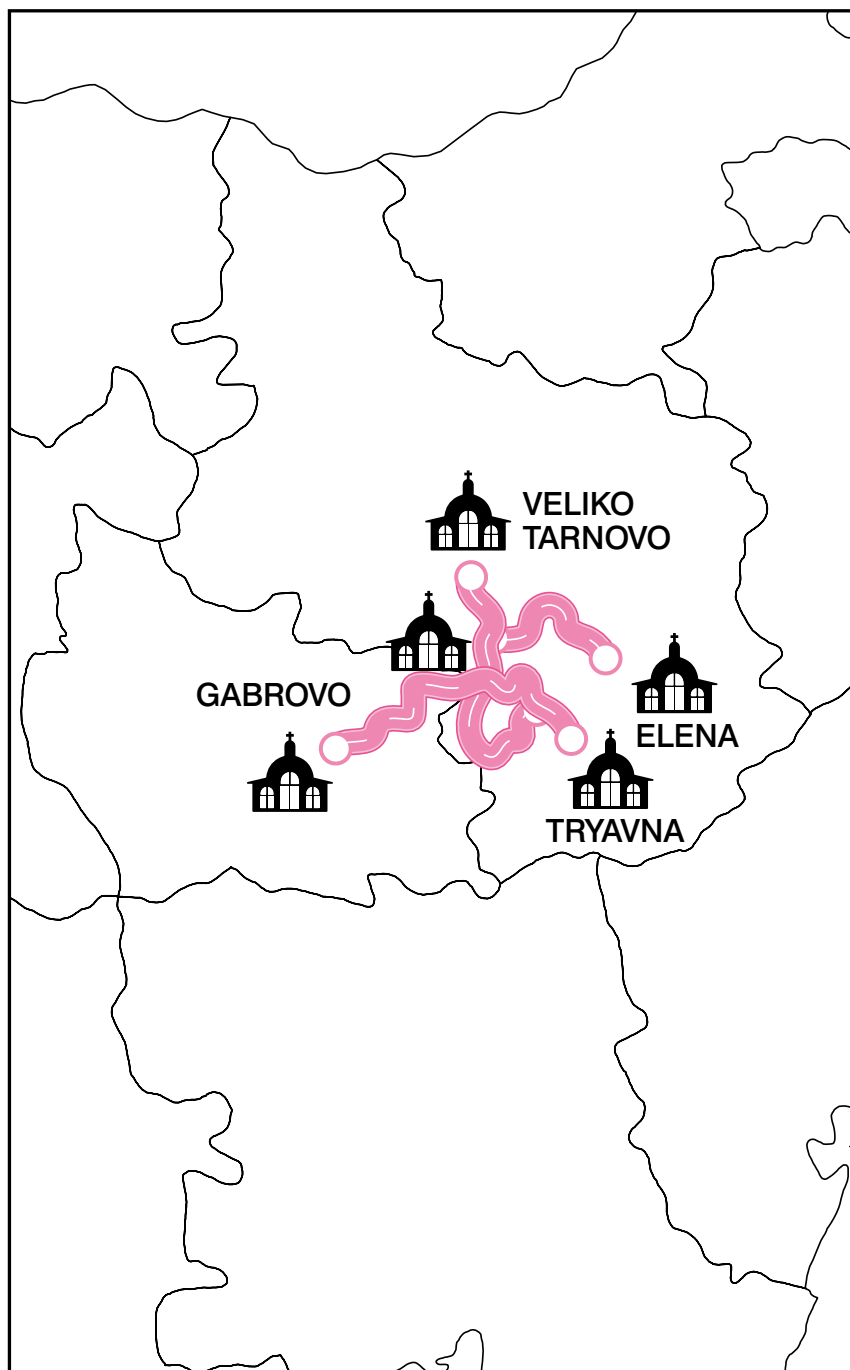
On the day of the Feast of the Cross (September 14), thousands of believers come to the Krastova Gora to pray for health. They take part in a night vigil in front of the Church of the Shroud of Mother of God and in the prayer procession. A hundred meters from Krastova Gora there is a miraculous spring called the Galabichkata (Little Dove). Its water is healing; the sightless see and the mute speak as soon as they sip from it.

Krastova Gora (Cross Forest) is a spiritual centre and a sacred place for Christians in Bulgaria. It is located in the heart of the Rhodope Mountains, close to Krastov Vrah (Peak). Monks from the Bachkovo Monastery ransomed **a piece of the Cross of Christ** during Ottoman rule. But since the monastery was often robbed by the Turks, the monks decided to hide it in Krastova Gora. At that time, there was a metochion of the Bachkovo Monastery there. Nowadays, the area of Cross Forest is one of the largest Christian centres in and attracts many pilgrims. At the beginning of the complex, there is **the Church**



THE OLD BULGARIAN CAPITAL

Dryanovo Monastery
of St Archangel Michael

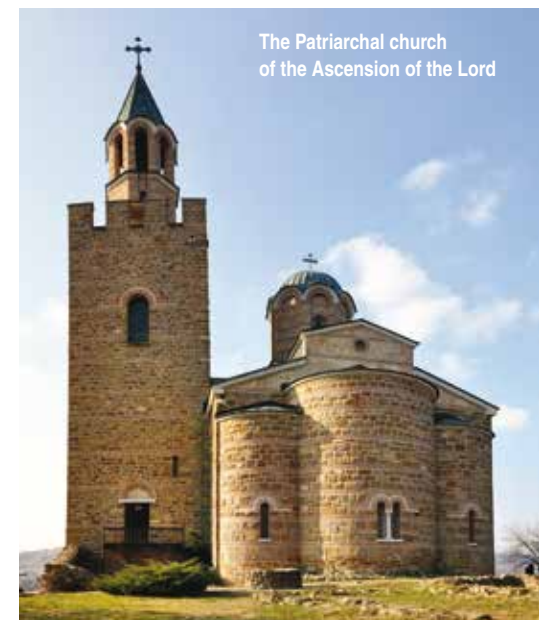


Veliko Tarnovo and Tarnovo's Holy Mounth

Veliko Tarnovo has been associated with Christianity since the early years of the establishment of the new religion in the Roman Empire. However, its fame and greatness, its role as a major Christian and historical centre, came with its election and establishment as the capital of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom (1185–1393). The town is situated on the historic hills of Tsarevets, Trapezitsa, Sveta Gora (lit. Holy Mounth), and Momina Krepost (Maiden's Fortress). On Tsarevets were located the Patriarchal and Palace complex. There were 19 medieval churches on Trapezitsa Hill.

The rulers of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and the Patriarchate of Tarnovo consistently and with great reverence took care to strengthen the heavenly protection of their tsardom, collecting and preserving holy relics and shrines and building magnificent temples and monasteries. During this era, the relics of 13 saints and numerous sacred artifacts were kept in Tarnovo. This made the medieval capital so famous in the Orthodox world that Patriarch Callistus of Constantinople called the Bulgarian royal city „the Second Constantinople and the Third Rome“. The city received a huge flow of pilgrims from all over Europe.

Tarnovo was the centre of the Bulgarian Patriarchate in the 12th–14th centuries. In the period of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, the official and canonical recognition of the patriarchal dignity of the Patriarchate of Tarnovo was achieved by all the ancient Christian Patriarchates – Roman, Constantinople, Alexandria, Antioch and Jerusalem. Tarnovo has its holy patriarchs and other holy persons canonized here,



The Patriarchal church
of the Ascension of the Lord

who carried to different parts of Europe the achievements of the Tarnovo spiritual school. Representatives of this school are St Theodosius of Tarnovo, St Joachim of Tarnovo, St Macarius, Patriarch of Tarnovo, St Romil Bdinsky – who revived hesychasm in Serbia, St Cyprian of Kiev, Lithuania and Moscow, teacher of St Sergius of Radonezh, St Grigory Tsamblak, St Patriarch Euthymius and many others. St Sava of Serbia died in Tarnovo.

The Church of the Forty Martyrs is located at the foot of the Tsarevets Fortress. It was built in the 9th century. It was rebuilt and renovated after the victory of Tsar Ivan Asen II over the Epirus despot Theodore Komnenos at Klokotnitsa on March 9, 1230 – the day of the Feast of the Holy Forty Martyrs. At the end of the 12th century, the rulers of the Asen dynasty built a monastery around the church. In the sources from the 12th to 14th centuries, it is called „The Great Lavra“ (Royal Monastery) and was one of the most important medieval monasteries near Tarnovo. The Bulgarian kings Kaloyan (1197–1207) and Ivan Asen II (1218–1241) are buried in the church, as were St Sava of Serbia and the queens Anna Maria and Irina Komnene.

The Church of St Demetrius of Salonica, which is located under the northeastern slope of Trapezitsa Hill, is the oldest and most accurately dated medieval church of Tarnovo. It is associated with the proclamation of the revolt of the boyars Peter and Asen to reject the Byzantine rule in 1186.

The Church of the Forty Martyrs





The Church of St Demetrius of Salonica

The coronations of the first rulers of the Asen dynasty – Peter, Asen and Kaloyan – took place there. In 1204, Basil I was proclaimed Archbishop of Tarnovo and Primate of Bulgaria and Wallachia.

The Church of St Apostles Peter and Paul is located at the northern foot of the fortress on Tsarevets Hill. Its construction is associated with the transfer of the relics of St John of Polivot by Tsar Kaloyan to the capital city of Tarnovo in 1204. The church was built by Tsar Ivan Asen II. Later, a monastery complex was formed around it. There are three layers of frescoes preserved in the church, the oldest dating back to the 13th century. After the fall of Tarnovo to Ottoman rule, the Bulgarian Patriarchate was moved to the church. Patriarch Euthymius served there for about two years (until 1393). The relics of St Michael the Warrior of Potuka and of St Yoan Rilski were kept there.


The Church of St George is located at the southern foot of the Trapezitsa fortress. It is a massive stone building, reportedly existing in the 13th–14th centuries and rebuilt in 1612. Its frescoes are among the best examples of Bulgarian painting from the 17th century.

 **The Church of Sts Cyril and Methodius** was built under the southern slope of Trapezitsa by master Kolyo Ficheto. The temple had two domes that fell during the earthquake of 1913 and have not been restored to this day. It was used for services in Bulgarian for 10 years before the Bulgarian Church officially gained its independence. Metropolitan Hilarion of Makaripolis reconsecrated the temple in 1872. The church was named after the holy brothers Sts Cyril and Methodius, but the temple is also known by the name St Athanasius. The second altar carries his name. The third is dedicated to St Apostles Peter and Paul.

 **The Cathedral Church of the Nativity of the Blessed Virgin Mary** stands on a small square in the old part of Tarnovo (Bolyar Mahala) and is also the work of master Kolyo Ficheto. The temple was completely destroyed in the huge earthquake of 1913, but thanks to a preserved plaster model of the building, a new temple with the same facade was erected in its place, and a dome and bell tower were added (1924–1934). Metropolitan Kliment (Vasil Drumev) is buried next to the church.

The Tarnovo Holy Mounth

The area around the old Bulgarian capital is also a centre for Christians from all over Bulgaria because of the ring of monasteries around the city, called the Tarnovo Holy Mounth. Some of them also exhibit the mastery Kolyo Ficheto.

 **The Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration of God** is located 7 km north of Veliko Tarnovo. It is the largest of the monasteries around Veliko Tarnovo and the fourth largest in Bulgaria. It was founded in the 11th century and was originally a metochion of the Vatopedi Monastery of Athos. In 1360, during the reign of Tsar Ivan Alexander, the monastery was granted autonomy. King Ivan Alexander's second wife, Sarah, and his son, Tsar Ivan Shishman, donated much for its reconstruction and renovation. Because of this, the monastery is also known as „Sarin“ (of Sarah) or „Shishmanov“ (of Shishman). It was originally located about 400–500 m south of its present location. The main church, as well as the bell tower with a clock and the small church of the Annunciation, are the work of master Kolyo Ficheto. The interior and exterior walls, as well as some of the icons of the temple, were painted by Zahari Zograf. The museum collection of the monastery contains valuable church and cultural relics.



The Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration of God



The Wheel of Life




In the Monastery of the Holy Transfiguration of God is kept one of the most beautiful Bulgarian church frescoes, „The Wheel of Life“ by Zahari Zograf. The composition represents two concentric circles illustrating the two ways of life that people follow. The outer circle depicts the pursuit of material wealth. In the middle of his life, the man who has followed this path is at the height of happiness. He is depicted

with a sceptre and a purse of money, but then the wheel quickly turns, and the man (now old and plagued by illness) realises that it was all in vain, for after his death, there will be no memory of these aspirations. The inner circle represents the path of spiritual development: with these goods, man is happy even after the end of his earthly journey, because his life has not been meaningless, so the fruits of his labour remain even after the wheel has come full circle. In the centre is a beautiful young woman in sumptuous for her time clothes, holding the Cup of pleasures as a symbol of life.



Dryanovo Monastery of St Archangel Michael

 **The Dryanovo Monastery of St Archangel Michael** is located in the valley of the Dryanovska Reka (River), 4 km from the town of Dryanovo. The monastery was founded in the late 12th or early 13th century. At the end of the 14th century, it was destroyed and later rebuilt in the locality of the Small Archangel Michael. Subsequently, the monastery was destroyed again and rebuilt, for the third time, in the 18th century, where it is today. The monastery is one of the focal points of the national liberation movement and a stronghold of Bulgarianness. It houses a museum collection of valuable icons and exhibits from all historical eras, including findings from the Neolithic Age discovered in the nearby Bacho Kiro Cave.




Kilifarevo Monastery of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary, is located along the river Belitsa, about 14 km from Veliko Tarnovo. It was founded around 1350 by the eminent Bulgarian hesychast St Theodosius of Tarnovo with the support of Tsar Ivan Alexander. The holy monastery became the centre of a literary school. From this school, much spiritual literature was subsequently spread to Serbia and Russia. In the monastery have resided numerous saints, followers of St Gregory of Sinai and the doctrine of the Hesychast, such as St Patriarch Euthymius of Tarnovo, Metropolitan Cyprian of Kiev, Lithuania, and Moscow, Romylos of Vidin, etc.



Kilifarevo Monastery of the Nativity of the Virgin Mary



 **The Kapinovo Monastery of St Nicholas the Wonderworker** is located by the Veselina River, 14 km south of Veliko Tarnovo. It was founded in 1272 during the reign of Tsar Constantine I Tih (1257–1277). During the Ottoman invasion, it was burnt down, then it was rebuilt and devastated several times. In 1794, its abbot was St Sophronius of Vratsa, who transcribed *Istoriya Slavyanoblgarskaya* in the monastery (a foundational work of the Bulgarian Revival). During the Revival, the monastery was a hotbed of enlightenment. The church St Nicholas Wonderworker is rich with icons from the 18th and 19th centuries, beautiful iconostasis royal doors with carved elements, typical of the Tryavna woodworkers. The carved bishop's throne dates from the 18th century. There is a holy well in the monastery yard.

The Kapinovo Monastery of St Nicholas the Wonderworker



The Kapinovo Monastery



🏰 **The Holy Trinity Patriarchal Monastery** is located at the foot of the Arbanasi plateau, about 6 km from Veliko Tarnovo. It was founded in the 14th century by St Patriarch Euthymius and Tsar Ivan Shishman. The monastery is a great literary centre. A new church was built by Kolyo Ficheto on the old foundations and the underground ossuary, and the frescoes were painted by Zahari Zograf. In 1913, an earthquake collapsed a large part of the monastery. Some valuable icons survived. It was rebuilt in 1927.

🏰 **The Plakovo Monastery of St Elijah the Prophet** is located about 18 km from Veliko Tarnovo. It was founded during the reign of Tsar Ivan Asen II and was originally located a few kilometres from the present-day monastery, where a small ancient church can still be seen. The monastery was erected on its present site in the second half of the 13th century. Destroyed during the Ottoman invasion, it was subsequently rebuilt several times and burned and looted again. In 1865, master Kolyo Ficheto built a majestic 26-meter bell tower.

🏰 **The Lyaskovets Monastery of Sts Peter and Paul** lies on the rocks in the northern part of the Arbanasi plateau. It is also known as the Petropavlov Monastery (lit. Monastery of Peter and Paul). It is a complex of the ruined church of St Apostles Peter and Paul, two chapels – **Shroud of the Mother of God** and **St Trinity**, a bell tower, residential and farm buildings. It was founded by the brothers Asen and Peter in gratitude for the success of the uprising for the liberation of Bulgaria from Byzantine rule. Nearby is the rock on which the brothers' fortress was located and where the uprising was planned.

🏰 **Merdanya Monastery of St Forty Martyrs** is 14 km east of Veliko Tarnovo. The monastery was built in the 13th century and rebuilt in the 19th century. Icons from the 19th century are kept in the temple.

🏰 **The Arbanasi Monastery of St Nicholas the Wonderworker** was founded during the reign of the kings of the Asen dynasty. In 1393, it was destroyed. The monastery complex consists of a temple, residential and farm buildings, and a chapel. The temple was renovated in 1735 with the help of the Arbanasi boyar Athanasius – later killed by the Ottomans for his participation in a conspiracy against the empire. The church is a single nave, single-apse, with a central dome and narthex, with an eastern wing for males and a western wing for females. In 1716, the chapel of St Elijah was built into the church's northern side. Some old icons have been preserved.




The Arbanasi Monastery of St Nicholas the Wonderworker




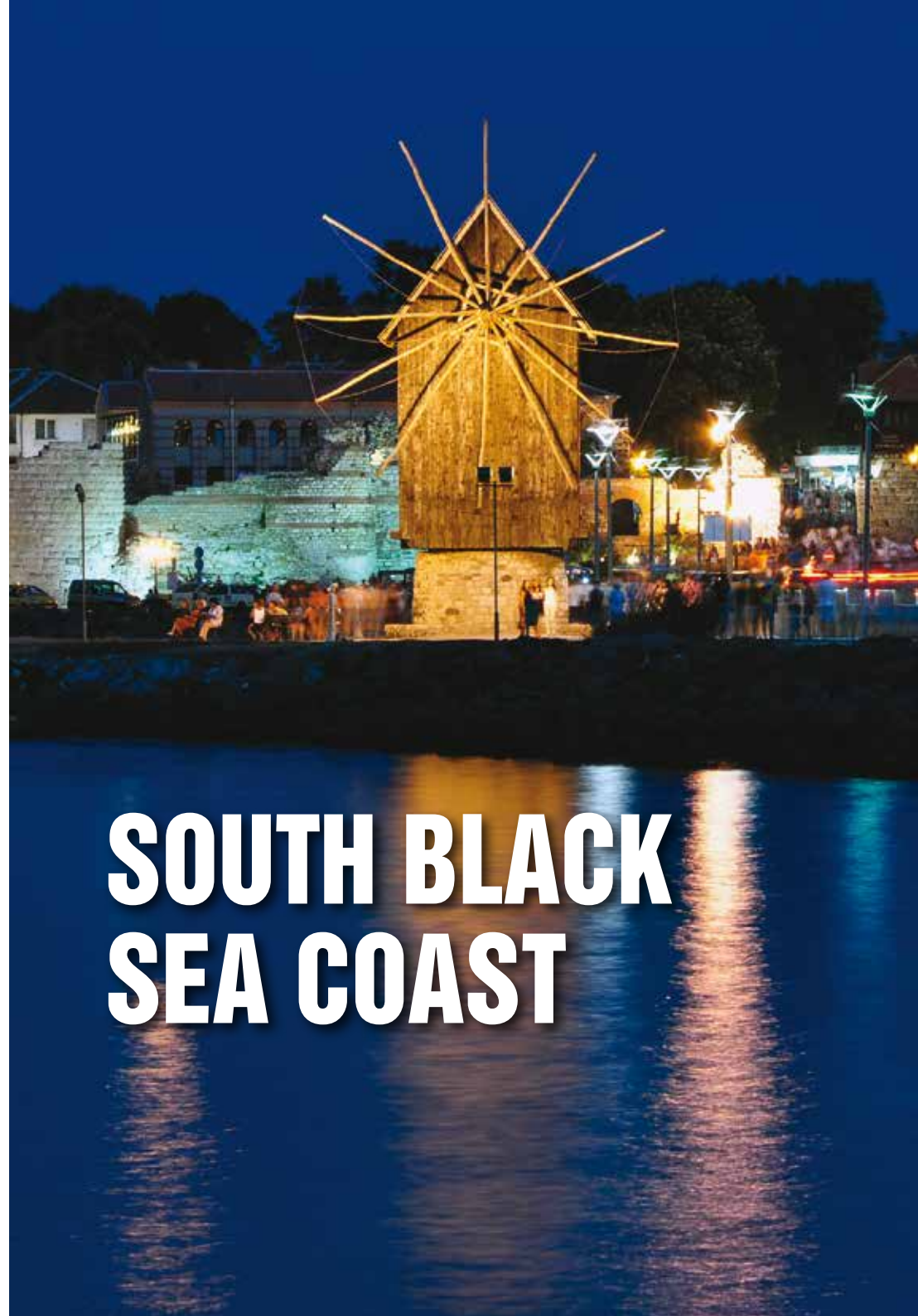


The Arbanasi Monastery of St Nicholas the Wonderworker

Of great interest are the old carved wooden iconostasis, the wooden cross covered with silver and decorated with enamel and coloured stones, and the ancient bronze chandelier from 1746.

 **The Arbanasi monastery of the Assumption of the Mother of God** was founded during the Second Bulgarian State. During the first years of Ottoman rule, it was preserved as a wealthy monastery, but later it fell into disrepair. In 1680, the present monastery church was built on its site. The monastery was devastated again in 1798 and rebuilt once more. The monastery's greatest treasure is the wonderworking icon of **the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Three Hands**, known as the **Weeping Holy Mother of God**. The shrine is embossed and overlaid with silver.


 According to tradition, **the Prisov monastery of St Archangel Michael** was built by the brothers Asen and Peter in memory of the Bulgarian soldiers who died in battle against Isaac Angelos on Archangel's Day. After a period of devastation and reconstruction, the present church was built in 1858. The monastery is associated with the national liberation struggles. Valuable Revival icons of the monastery are kept today in the crypt of the St Alexander Nevsky Cathedral.




SOUTH BLACK SEA COAST

The Southern Black Sea Coast – the Spirit of the Holy Apostles

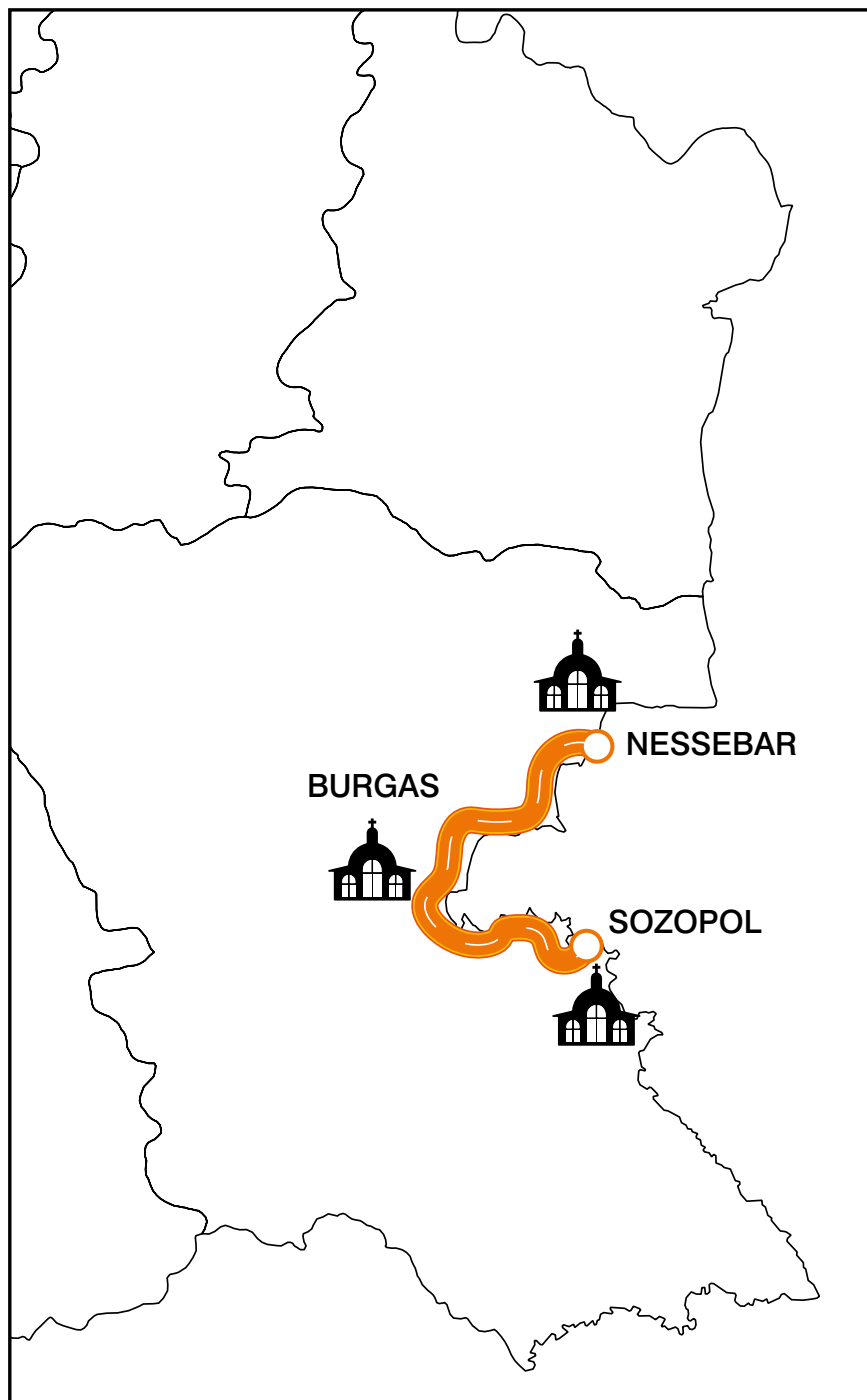
Some of Bulgaria's most wonderful places for relaxation and fun on the seashore hide incredible pilgrimage sites from the time of the Holy Apostles. As part of the Roman Empire, the settlements along our Black Sea coast bear the marks of early Christianity and remember the footsteps of the holy apostles Andrew the First-Called, Philip, Stachys Amplias and Carpus, who sowed the Word of God from little Byzantium to present-day Varna.

 **The Cathedral of Sts Cyril and Methodius** is one of the symbols of Burgas, the largest temple in the city and among the most beautiful in Bulgaria. The building is a three-aisled basilica built of green Aytos stone, marble, and brick, with an impressive, lavish facade. It was constructed in 1895–1907 according to the plans of architect Ricardo Toscani, and painted by D. Gyudzhenov and N. Kozhuharov.

 **The Church of St Mother of God**, built in 1840–1860, is the oldest in Burgas. It is located in the city centre. It is a three-aisled basilica with 12 monolithic marble columns and wide balconies. It preserves icons painted by monks of the Holy Mount, Mount Athos. In 1927–1928, the two towers of the church were built, and three impressive bells were placed in one of them.

Nessebar: the „encyclopedia“ of Christian church construction

Nessebar is one of the oldest cities in Europe (more than 3200 years old). After the relocation of the capital of the Roman Empire to Constantinople, intensive construction of temples began, which continued during the First and



Second Bulgarian Kingdoms. So far, 44 churches have been discovered in the Old Town of Nessebar, built over the span of 14 centuries! The peninsula was once at least three times larger, and the number of churches exceeded 100, including some of the oldest early-Christian basilicas in Europe. Almost throughout its history, the city has been a metropolitan residence. It is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

🏛️ **The Basilica of St Virgin Mary Eleusa (Tenderness)** from the 6th century is the oldest Mesembrian church. It is likely that an icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary Eleusa with a silver setting was kept here. Today, the icon is at the National History Museum.

🏛️ **The Basilica of St Sophia (the Old Bishopric)** is one of the symbols of Nessebar and of Christianity in the Bulgarian lands. The temple was built at the end of the 5th century and rebuilt around the 8th–9th. In the Middle Ages, it was the cathedral of the Metropolitan diocese. The church functioned until the end of the 18th century.

🏛️ **The Church of St John the Baptist**, built in the 10th century on the foundations of a church from the 6th century, is a typical representative of the transition from the truncated basilicas to the cruciform church.

🏛️ **The Temple of St Stephen (the New Bishopric)** from the 11th century was once dedicated to the Blessed Virgin Mary. It was enlarged in the 16th and 18th centuries. Almost completely preserved are its iconostasis from the 16th century and the original frescoes with over 1000 figures in 258 compositions related to the life of the Most Holy Mother of God.



The Old Bishopric in Nessebar



The Church Christ Pantocrator in Nessebar

Beautifully preserved are the churches of **St Demetrius** from the 11th century, as well as of **Sts Archangels Michael and Gabriel**, of **Christ Pantocrator**, of **St John Aliturgetos (St John the Unconsecrated)** and of **St Paraskeva** from the 13th century and the church **Ascension of the God** (St Spas) from 1609, which has preserved frescoes from 17th century.

🏛️ **The Assumption of the Mother of God** was built in 1873 and is the only church where you can attend Holy Mass. The wonderworking icon of St Mary, called **The Black Virgin**, is placed there for worship.

The Black Virgin


Every year on August 15th, the Nessebar Church of the Assumption of the Mother of God fills with people. On this day is the feast of the town, and in the courtyard of the church, a corban (sacrificial rite) is made for health. People come to worship the icon known as the „Black Virgin“.




She is the patroness of Nessebar, chases away demons, and heals the sick. According to legend, the icon was found two centuries ago, hanging on the oldest tree in town. Locals used to take it down for pilgrimage around the churches and then hang it on the tree again. One night, a local virgin dreamed that the Virgin Mary told her that she wanted a permanent home on the site of the tree. Thus, the Church of the Assumption of the Mother of God was erected.

Old Sozopol keeps relics of St John the Baptist

The greatness of Sozopol as an influential ecclesiastical centre, traditionally closely linked to Constantinople, was great. It was an independent diocese of the Ecumenical Patriarchate from the 14th to the 20th centuries. The churches, which according to research data numbered 63, were destroyed by Ottoman invaders in the 15th to 19th centuries. In place of some of them, small chapels were built, some of which have survived to this day. In the 16th century, all the monasteries in the area of the Burgas Bay and Sozopol were destroyed.

 The ruins of the **Medieval Church with a basilica** are located in the Old Town. The church had rich architectural decoration and floor mosaics, which were destroyed by fire in the 9th century. At the end of the 11th century, it was rebuilt and painted, and around it were built an ossuary and a monastic complex. It is believed to have been the seat of the Sozopol bishopric between the 10th and the 17th century, when it was destroyed.

 **The Church of Assumption of St Mary** was built in the 15th century on the site of an older medieval Christian temple. Dug into the ground, externally, it is almost indistinguishable from a house. In 1482, by a patriarchal charter of the abbot of the island monastery of St John Prodromus, the church was converted into the monastery's metochion. In its present form, the temple was built in several stages. It preserves a carved iconostasis, a pulpit, and a bishop's throne from the late 18th century, the work of masters from the Debar school. The church is under the auspices of UNESCO.

Relics of St Nicholas the Wonderworker from the church of the St Nicholas the Wonderworker Monastery



The monastery St Nicholas the Wonderworker, where the relics of St Nicholas of Myra are kept

🏰 **The Church of St George** is the largest serving Orthodox church in Sozopol. Located in the Old Town, it was constructed in 1828 on the site of an old basilica, and has been rebuilt many times, most recently in 1991. The church holds valuable icons from the latter half of the 19th century, **a piece of the relics of John the Baptist**, found on St Ivan Island, **a fragment of the Holy Cross**, and **part of the relics of St Apostle Andrew the First-Called**.

🏰 **The Church of St Zosimus** is a church chapel, which is located in the park of the Old Town. It was built in 1857 on the ruins of a medieval church. It is dedicated to St Zosimus of Sozopol, the patron saint of the town. It is a single-aisled, single-apse church built of hewn stone.

🏰 **The Church of Sts Cyril and Methodius (The Refugee Church)** was built in 1889 with funds from Bulgarian refugees from Adrianople and Aegean Thrace by master Gencho from Tryavna. It preserves a valuable carved iconostasis, the work of Debar masters of the 17th–18th centuries, which was transferred from the destroyed in the 19th century church of St John the Theologian. It was not in use during Socialist times. It was returned to the Synod of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church in 1989 and after a reconstruction in 2011, it is again used for worship.

🏰 **The St Nicholas the Wonderworker Monastery** is located between the South Gate of the Old Town and the Church of Sts Cyril and Methodius. The monastery church, a type of three-aisled basilica, was built in either the 10th or the 11th century, then rebuilt in the 13th, and converted into a cemetery in the 14th–17th centuries. Since 2012, the central part of the church houses **the open reliquary with the relics of St Nicholas of Myra**.

🏰 The monastery of **Sts Cyricus and Julita** is located on the island of St Cyricus (Sts Cyricus and Julita), the only island on the Bulgarian Black Sea coast that is connected to the mainland by a breakwater. The monastery was destroyed in 1629.

🏰 **The monastery St John the Forerunner** from the 4th century is located on the St Ivan Island, the largest in the Bulgarian part of the Black Sea. The monastery was imperial and patriarchal and directly subordinate to the Patriarch of Constantinople. In 2010 **a reliquary with the relics of St John the Baptist** was found there.

🏰 **Pomorie** was founded in the 4th century BC with the name Anchialos. **The church Transfiguration of Jesus** was built in 1763–1764 on the site of a smaller temple from the 9th century. Of interest is the carved iconostasis

with floral motifs. The large icons of the royal order were painted between the 17th and 18th centuries, and some in the 16th century. Below the royal icon of Jesus Christ, in the soleas, there is a small well of holy water called the Tears of Christ.

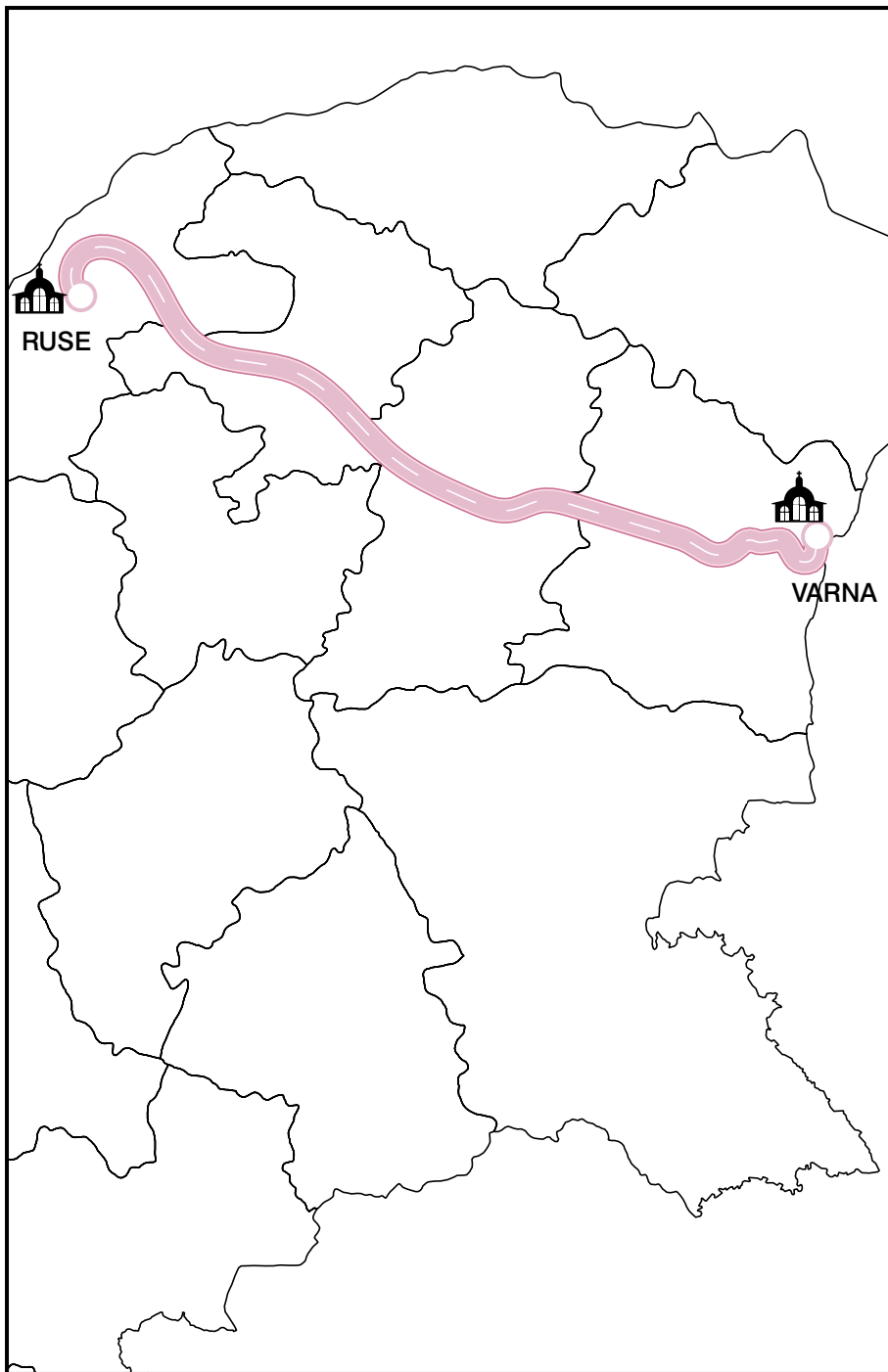
🏰 **Pomorie Monastery of the St George** is located in the town centre. The church of the monastery was built in 1856 on the foundations of an earlier temple and in 1945 it was expanded. Today it preserves many valuable examples of iconographic art from the 18th and 19th centuries. One of the most precious shrines in the monastery is the basilica with a built-in **bas-relief of St George**. The emblem of the monastery is the 20-metre bell tower, built in 1966.



The reliquary with the relics of St Nicholas of Myra in Sozopol

NORTH-EASTERN BULGARIA

The Ivanovo Monastery



Varna – the city of St Andrew the First-Called

The lands of today's Bulgaria were sanctified by the preaching of the apostles and their disciples. One of them was Andrew the First-Called Apostle of Christ, who sanctified with his footsteps and sermon the lands along the Bulgarian Black Sea coast, part of what was once Scythia. The apostle set out north from Byzantium along the shores of the Black Sea. The northernmost point of his journey was Odessos – today's Varna, where he preached and managed to attract many inhabitants to the faith of Christ. According to the evidence of ancient writers, two of the 12 Apostles preached in Scythia – Sts Apostle Andrew the First-Called and Apostle Philip. St Apostle Andrew appointed as the first bishop of the city of Odessos his disciple St Apostle Ampliatus. The name of Apostle Ampliatus appears in Holy Scripture to Romans (16:8): „Greet Ampliatus, my dear friend in the Lord“. After St Apostle Ampliatus, St Apostle Carpus (both among the 70 Apostles) served in the city. He also enlightened the present-day city of Stara Zagora. St Apostle Zinas, bishop of Diospol (today Yambol), is also connected to St Apostle Andrew the First-Called. The fruits of their apostolic mission can be seen today in the area around Varna. Some of the most impressive Christian temples are located here. Today's Diocese of Varna and Veliki Preslav are the successors of, on one hand, the Chair of St Apostle Andrew, and on the other, of the Veliki Pre-





The Grand Cathedral Assumption of the Mother of God in Varna

slav Cathedral – the capital of the First Bulgarian Kingdom, where under the rule of St Tsar Boris, Bulgaria adopted Christianity and the Glagolitic script.

🏛️ **The Grand Cathedral of Assumption of the Mother of God** is one of the symbols of Varna. It is located in the city centre. The temple was built in 1880–1886 and is the second largest in Bulgaria. Its name was chosen in memory of the great Russian Empress Maria Alexandrovna, Bulgarian benefactress and aunt of the Bulgarian Prince Alexander I. It was erected by Gencho Kanchev according to the prints of the Odessa architect Maas. Its iconostasis was made by the Debar carver Filip Avramov Dichev. In 1901, 42 smaller and 3 large icons painted by Nicholas Bogoshkiy were brought from Russia as an aid from the Russian Tsar Nicholas II. In 1941–1943, the bell tower (38 m high) was completed. Thus, the church became the second highest in the country after the Patriarchal Cathedral-Monument St Alexander Nevsky of Sofia. On 26 December 2012, The Mother of God mosaic icon „St Mother of God – Gerontissa“ (Spiritual Old Woman) was brought from the Pantokratoros Monastery in the Holy Mount, Mount Athos.

🏛️ **The ancient Church of the Assumption of the Mother of God**, built in 1602, is in the Varna neighbourhood of Ayazmoto (The Holy Well). After a fire in 1640, the church was rebuilt and expanded to its present form. Until 1914, it was under the care of the Greek Metropolitan, then it was closed for ten years. In 1924, after the arrival of its Bulgarian rector, it was reopened. Particularly interesting is the iconostasis of The Little St Mother of God. It is made of dark wood, probably walnut or cypress, saturated with



Detail of the interior of the Cathedral Assumption of the Mother of God

Orthodox symbols and richly ornamented. An exceptional treasure of the temple is **the icon St Holy Mother with the Christ Child– Tenderness**. It was found in 1602 in the area of Karaach Teke among the remains of a knyaz's monastery from the First Bulgarian Kingdom.

🏛️ **The Sea Temple of St Nicholas the Wonderworker** is located in the centre of Varna. It was a Greek Orthodox church until 1906, after which Bulgarian priests began to worship there. It is the only maritime temple in Bulgaria.


🏛️ **The Church of St Athanasius** is the old metropolitan church of Varna. It was built in 1838 on the site of an ancient temple that burned down two years prior. From 1920 to 1939, it served the Russian community in the town, and Russian priests worshipped there; in 1961–1991, it served as a museum of Revival iconography; a major renovation was carried out between 2006 and 2008. In the temple is kept a fragment of the Holy Cross and relics of 19 saints, **copies of the wonderworking icons St Mary Panthasa and St George the Victorious**.

🏛️ **Varna Monastery of Sts Constantine and Helena** is located in the centre of the oldest Black Sea resort in Bulgaria, Sts Constantine and Helena, which is built around it. Its emergence is associated with **the wonderworking icon of Sts Constantine and Helena** and the healing spring under the altar of the church. Its water is believed to help in the treatment of eye and other diseases. The wonderworking icon was kept in the church until the middle of the 20th century. Nowadays, the monastery is active. The

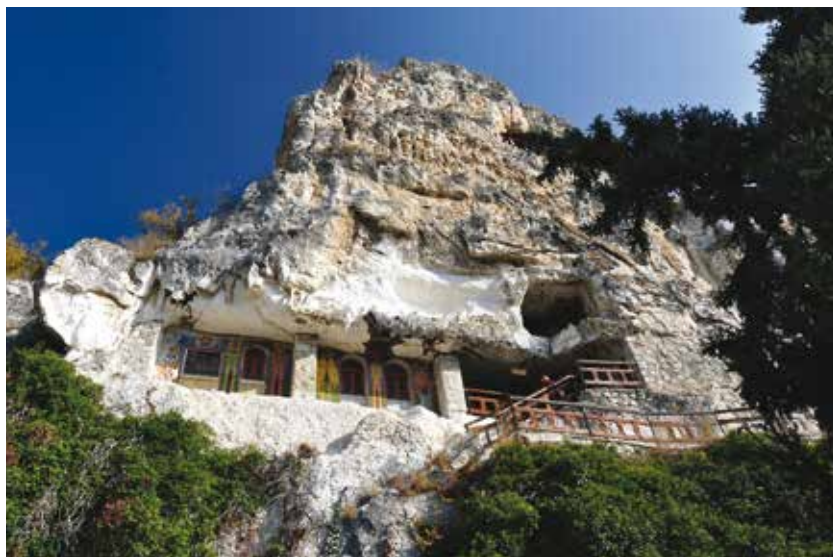
wooden dome of the church is particularly impressive with its almost circular shape and rich interior wood-carved decoration.

Rock-Hewn Monasteries in Bulgaria

Bulgaria can be called the cradle of ancient monasticism. Its territory is dotted with rock-hewn monasteries and churches inhabited in the Middle Ages by hermit monks. These temples of faith were hewn by hand in hard-to-reach cliffs, far from towns and villages. Most of them are along the Rusenski Lom River.

 **The Basarbovo Rock-Hewn Monastery** is located 10 km from **Ruse**. The monastery is very well preserved and extremely beautiful. Steep stairs that wind along the cliff lead to it. The monks' cells are located next to the church, carved into the stone. From the rock platform in front of them, a beautiful panorama of the valley of the Rusenski Lom River is revealed. A small footpath leads to the well with healing water, carved by St Demetrius of Basarbovo. The rock church has a carved iconostasis made in 1941. Next to it is a large full-length icon of the saint. Other stone steps lead up to a cave carved by the monk Chrysant, where he is buried. At the foot of the rocks is a cave refectory and two cells.

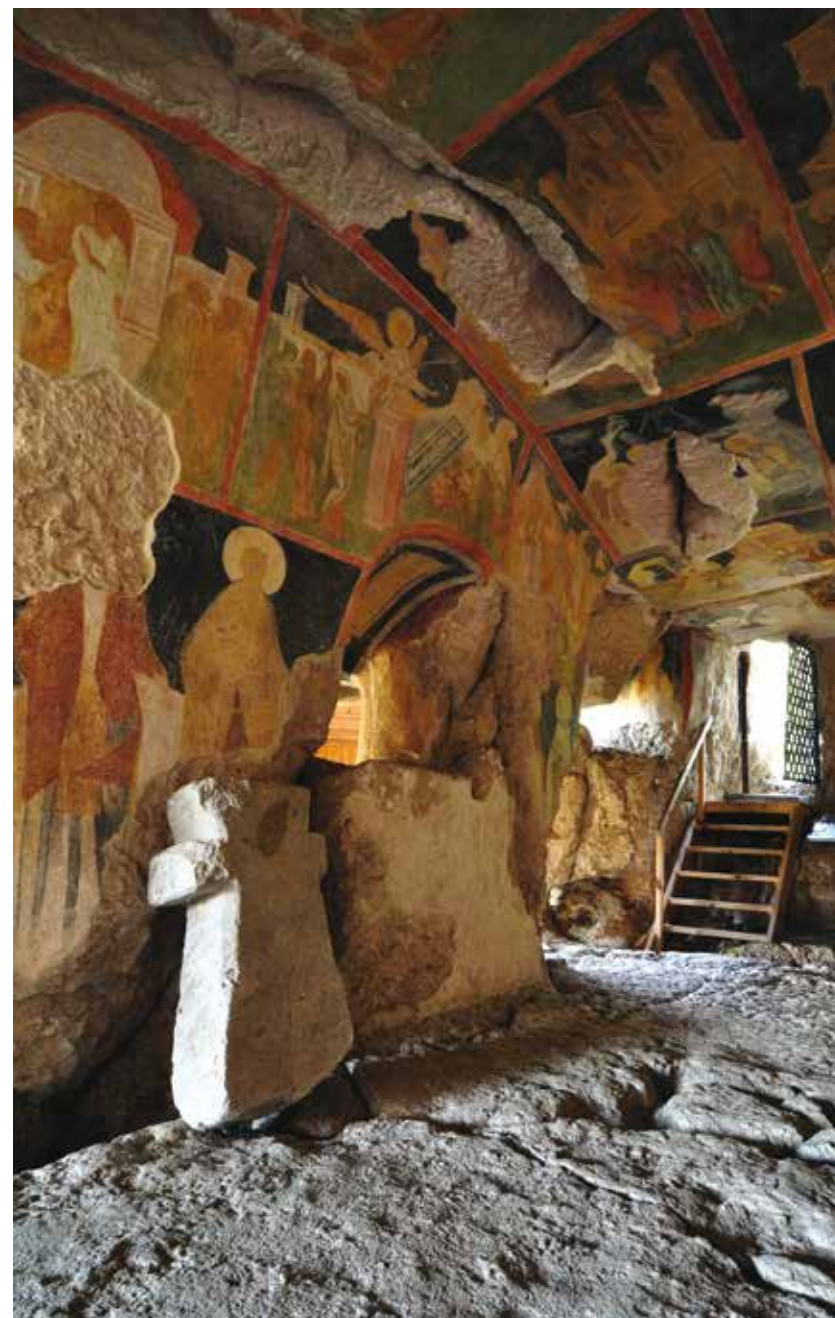
The Basarbovo Rock-Hewn Monastery




The Ivanovo Rock-Hewn Monastery of St Archangel Michael

is located 10 km from the Basarbovo Monastery and is one of the nine cultural and historical sites in Bulgaria included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. For this reason, no restoration has been carried out, only conservation of the frescoes, which date from the 13th and 14th centuries. It is a complex of about 20 rock churches, chapels, and monastic cells located in the canyon of the Rusenski Lom River. The donors of the monastery were Tsars Ivan Asen II and Ivan Alexander. Its frescoes are of exceptional historical and cultural value, a supreme achievement of medieval fine art from the time of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, and are the work of masters of the Tarnovo School of Art. The main church of the Mother of God is 38 meters high in the rocks. Its three rooms are entirely painted with biblical scenes. There is a portrait of the Ktitor (donor), probably of Tsar Ivan Asen II.

The Ivanovo Rock-Hewn Monastery of St Archangel Michael



The Ivanovo Rock-Hewn Monastery of St Archangel Michael

 **The Aladzha Monastery of St Holy Trinity** is located 14 km from Varna. Its name comes from *aladzha* – the Turkish word for colourful, probably because of the bright colours of the wall paintings from the Early Middle Ages. It is one of the best-preserved rock-hewn monasteries in Bulgaria, consisting of cave churches, chapels, and cells specially carved on three or four levels in the cliffs, connected by an external staircase. It was inhabited by hermit monks in the 13th and 14th centuries. Some scholars associate it with the spread of early Christianity in the Bulgarian lands and the emergence of the first monastic brotherhoods (3rd –5th centuries). After the fall of Bulgaria under Ottoman rule, the monastery was abandoned, but the local Christian population continued to venerate and visit it.

The Aladzha Monastery



The Aladzha Monastery

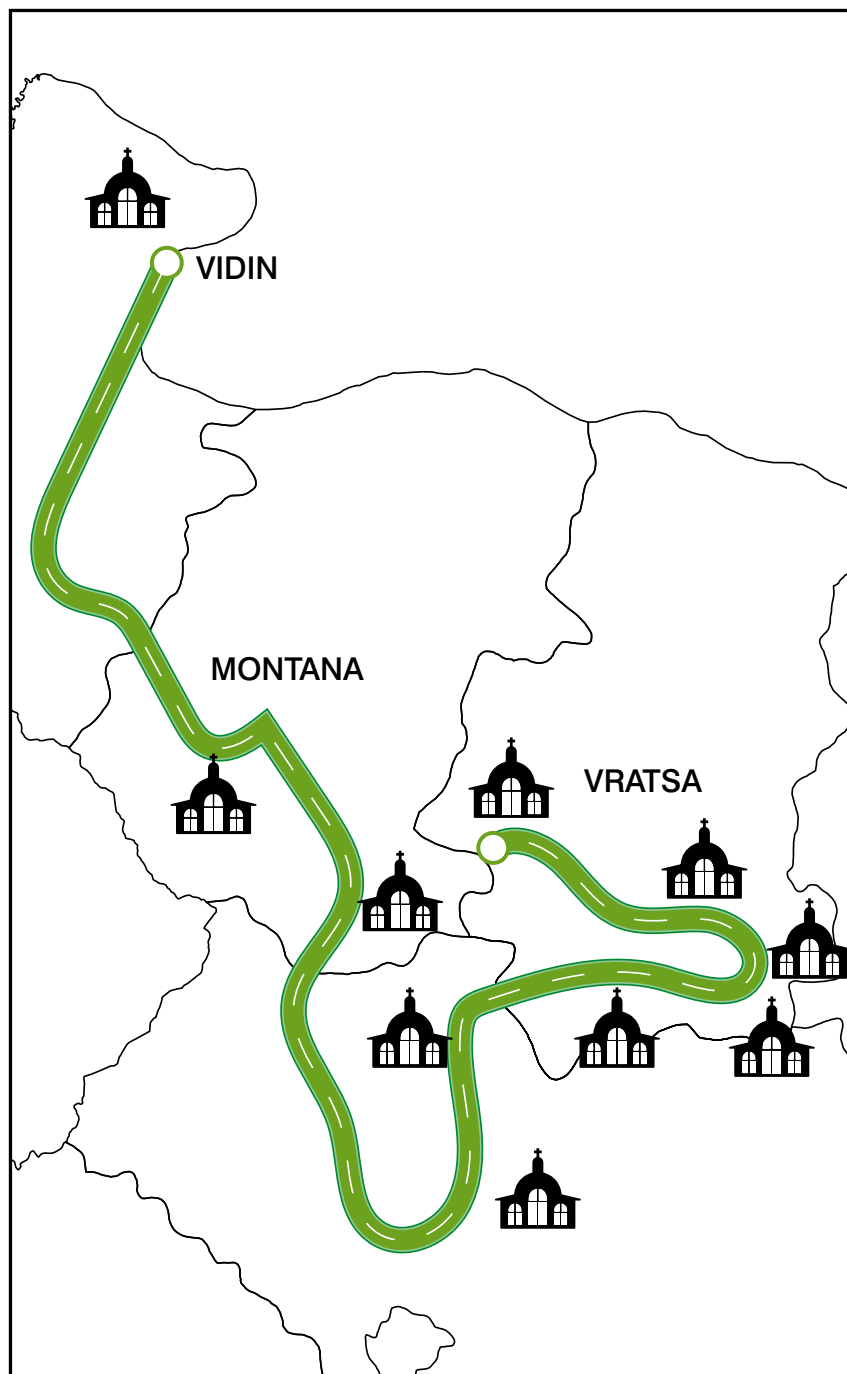


The bell of the Aladzha Monastery



NORTH-WESTERN BULGARIA


The Klisura Monastery




The Vidin Tsardom and its temples

Vidin is the largest city in Northwestern Bulgaria, and its history is directly linked to the end of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom and its fall under five centuries of Ottoman rule. Due to its remote location, the Vidin kingdom remained untouched by Ottoman attacks until 1396, when Vidin was captured by the invaders. The medieval Baba Vida Fortress, located on the north-west bank of the Danube, is a witness to these historical events. It is the only fully preserved medieval fortress in Bulgaria and a symbol of the town. The fortress served as a feudal castle where Tsar Ivan Sratsimir lived while he ruled the Vidin Tsardom. Baba Vida is surrounded by a moat, once filled with water from the Danube, over which a drawbridge descended.

Vidin offers many opportunities for pilgrimage tourism. It is the centre of a diocese that covers a vast territory with five spiritual districts: the Vidin, Kula, Lom, Belogradchik and Berkovitsa. There are 195 churches and 6 monasteries in the diocese, and this number does not include the inactive, neglected, or abandoned churches and monasteries, the number of which is insignificant.

 **The Cathedral of Saint Demetrius of Thessaloniki** is the third-largest Orthodox Church in Bulgaria. Its central dome is 33 m tall. It was built in 1885–1890 by the architect A. Bachnany. The iconostasis and the church furniture were carved by the Debar craftsmen of the Filipov family. The cathedral is a monument of culture of national importance, and it holds the **wonderworking icon of St Mother of Got of Mercy**.

 **The Church of St Nicholas of Myra the Wonderworker** was built in 1926 on the site of the old bell tower and an annex of St Pantaleon church. Today, it is a part of the complex of buildings consisting of the church St Pantaleon (1634), the chamber of the Vidin Bishopric (1924), the mausoleum of Exarch Antim I (1934), and the diocesan school (1926). The temple keeps **a part of the relics of St Nicholas the Wonderworker**.

Northwestern Bulgaria is home to several remarkable monasteries that are a drawing force for all Christians.

One of them is the **Klisura Monastery of Sts Cyril and Methodius**. It is located under the Todorini Kukli peak in the Western Stara Planina Mountain, 9 km from Berkovitsa. During the long years of its existence, the monastery has been destroyed, plundered, and rebuilt several times. The monastery is considered a monument of cultural importance. In 2000, the Klisura Monastery's holy well was restored with the so-called water of life, which, according to legend, flowed at the place where monks were killed after the Chiprovtsi uprising. The water comes from a spring and is considered to be healing.


The **Lopushna Monastery of St John the Forerunner** is located in the Chiprovtsi part of the Stara Planina Mountain, 21 km from Montana. There was a monastery in this place during the Second Bulgarian Kingdom, destroyed during Ottoman rule. It was rebuilt in 1850 and played the role of an important spiritual centre. It was a favourite place of the writer Ivan Vazov. The temple is not painted, but it has one of the most beautiful altar iconostases in Northern Bulgaria, an archiepiscopal throne, and three kissing iconostases made by masters of the Samokov art school. The two large iconostasis icons of the Lord Jesus Christ and St Virgin Mary were painted in 1863 by the prominent Bulgarian Renaissance painter Stanislav Dospevski. In 1856, a white stone fountain with three spouts decorated with stone reliefs was built in the yard of the monastery.


Lopushna Monastery of St John the Forerunner



Lopushna Monastery of St John the Forerunner



 **The Chiprovtsi Monastery of St Yoan Rilski** is located at the foot of the Yazov Mountain (part of the Western Stara Planina Mountain), 6 km away from Chiprovtsi. It is believed that the monastery was built in the 10th century. During its existence, it was destroyed six times. The present monastery was built in 1876 and is constantly maintained. The monastery complex consists of a church, a small cemetery with an ossuary with a three-storey tower preserving the bones of those who died in the Chiprovtsi uprising, a chapel with a bell tower, and a monastic cloister.

 **The Albotin Rock-Hewn Monastery** is located in the Albotin locality, 25 km from Vidin. The name of the monastery church is unknown, while the monastery is named after a village that no longer exists. The rock-hewn monastery was carved into the rock on the north side of the river, partly in natural caves, partly in additionally carved rooms, and added outer facades and walls. The monastery was active in the 14th century, as evidenced by preserved fragments of wall paintings and inscriptions, as well as jewellery (earrings, ear-laps, bracelets) found in the 29 excavated Christian graves.

The Chiprovtsi Monastery



The monasteries along the Iskarsko Defile (Iskar Gorge)

The Iskar is the longest Bulgarian river, almost 370 km long, including its tributaries. Scientists believe that the river existed before the formation of the Stara Planina Mountain. In the Sofia – Mezdra section, the river literally cuts deep into the mountain, forming a picturesque gorge filled with marvelous rock formations, caves, waterfalls, and beautiful monasteries.

The Cherepish Monastery of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary is one of the most picturesque Orthodox Christian temples in Bulgaria. It is located on the right bank of the Iskar River, about 10 km from Mezdra, where the river makes one of its biggest bends. It is surrounded on two sides by majestic cliffs. The temple was founded at the end of the 14th century during the reign of Tsar Ivan Shishman (1371–1393). According to legends, not far from the monastery, many warriors died in the struggle of the Bulgarian ruler against the Ottomans. Their bones remained on the battlefield, and both the region and the monastery are named after them. The Cherepish Gospel was written in the monastery in the 15th century.

Cherepish Monastery of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary




Cherepish Monastery of Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary







Osenovlag monastery of the Holy Mother of God

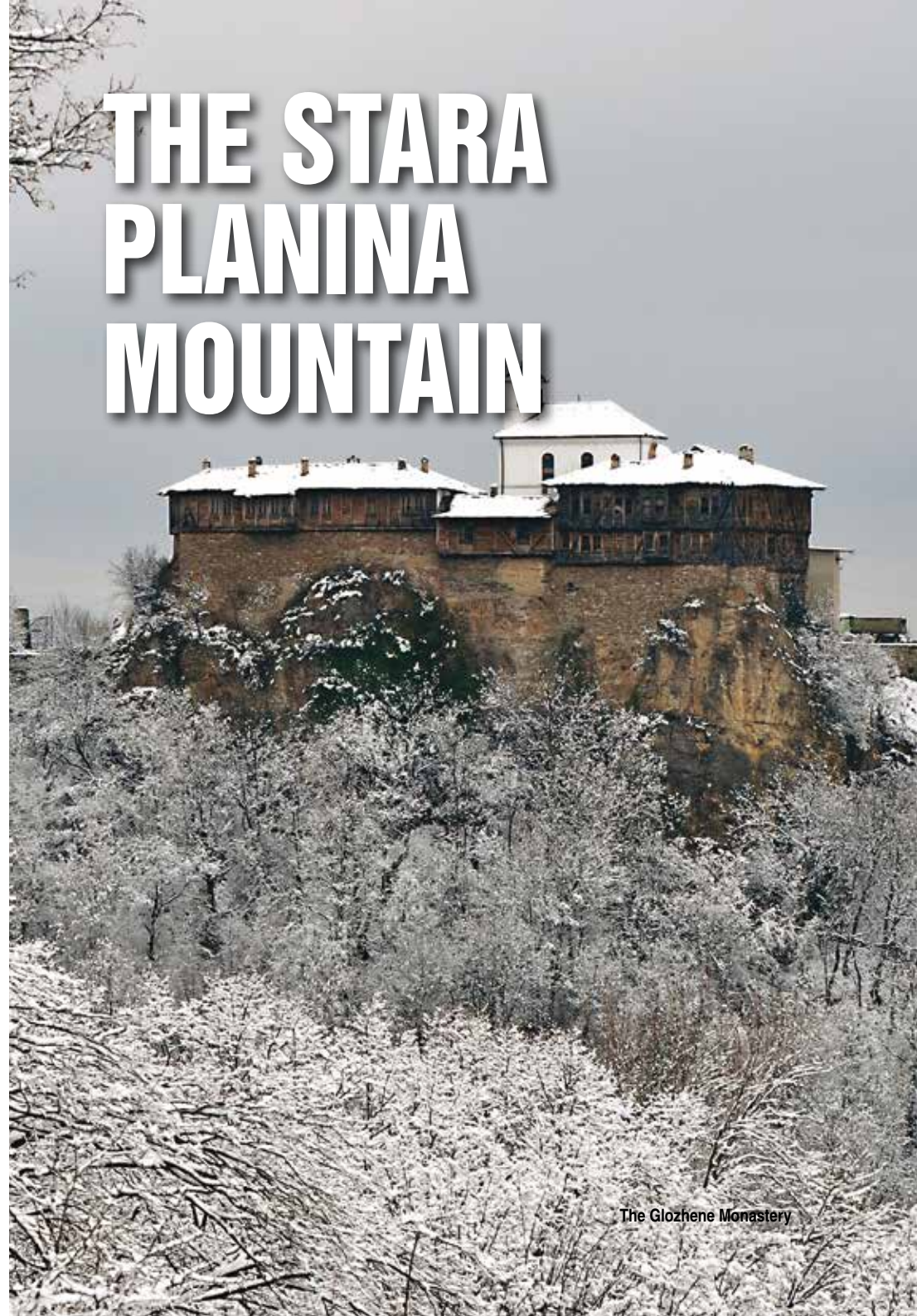
The temple was repeatedly burned and looted but was rebuilt by patriotic Bulgarians.

 **Osenovlag monastery of the Holy Mother of God (The Seven Altars).** It is so named because of the seven chapels in the church. According to legend, it was founded in the 16th century under the name Nativity of the Virgin Mary by the brother of the boyar Peter Delyan. The Horo is a valuable and one-of-a-kind work of applied art on a chandelier, which hangs on chains from the church dome. A fragment of the relics of brothers **Cosmas and Damian** is kept in the temple.

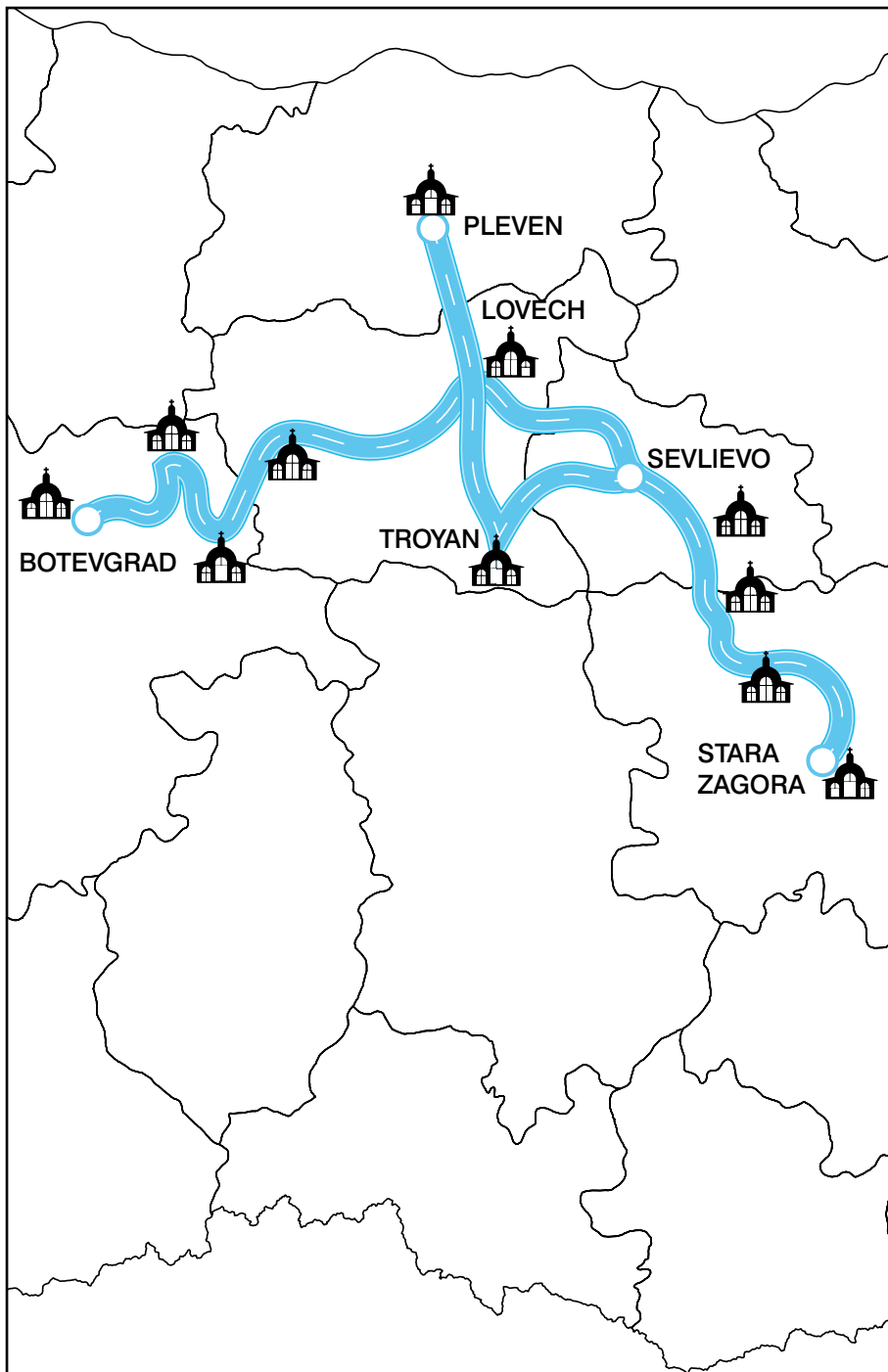
 **The Kurilo Monastery of St Yoan Rilski** is located 12 km from Sofia. It was founded in the 9th or 10th century. According to a legend, the relics of St Yoan Rilski were preserved in the monastery during their transfer from Tarnovo to the Rila Monastery.

 **The Bistrets Monastery of St Ivan Kasinets Pusti** is located about 6 km northwest of Vratsa. It is also known by several other names – St John the Theologian (after the patron of the monastery church), St Yoan Rilski (because it was believed that he had spent some time in the monastery), Kasinets (after the nearby peak Kassina, under which it is located), Bistretshky or Bistretzky (after the name of the nearby Vratsa district – Bistrets). Near the monastery, there are remains of a medieval fortress from the 12th to 14th centuries. It is assumed that the monastery was built during this period. There was a goldsmith's and a stamping workshop. The monastery was repeatedly destroyed and then rebuilt.

THE STARA PLANINA MOUNTAIN



The Glozhene Monastery



Epic of the Opalchenie

Every Bulgarian should climb the historic peak Shipka at least once in their life. Here, in the summer of 1877, the decisive battles took place, which have remained in history as the Shipka Epic. On the very peak stands the Monument of Freedom. A large bronze lion-symbol of the Bulgarian state-guards its entrance. On the other sides of the building are inscribed the names of Shipka, Sheinovo, and Stara Zagora, the battlefields on which the pass was defended. On the ground floor of the monument is a large marble sarcophagus, which holds some of the bones of the fallen Russian soldiers and Bulgarian volunteers. It is placed on four recumbent stone lions, and in front of it stand statues of a Bulgarian and a Russian soldier. On the upper four floors are exhibited copies of Bulgarian battle flags, including the Samara Flag, which is the first battle flag of the Bulgarian Opalchenie (the Bulgarian voluntary army that fought in the Liberation War).



Shipka Peak

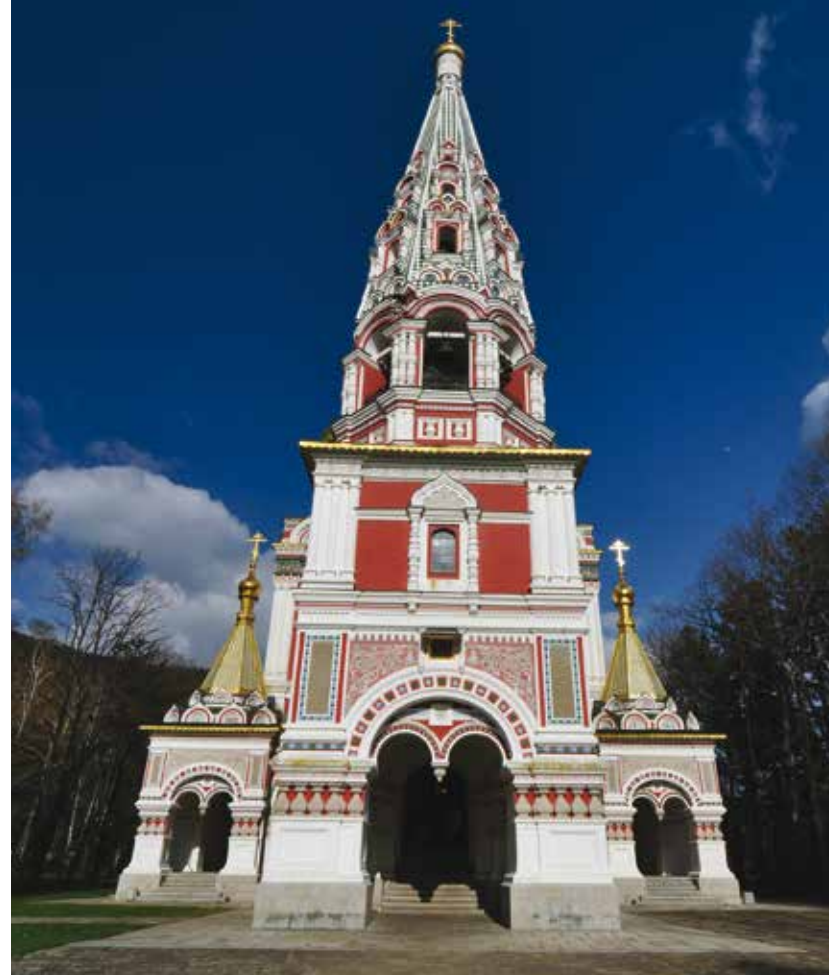


The Church-Monument of Shipka (Shipka Monastery of Nativity of Christ) is a symbol of respect for the heroes' feat and gratitude to Russia. It is located next to the town of Shipka. The idea for its founding came from the Russian diplomat Count Ignatyev and the mother of General Skobelev, Olga. The monastery was consecrated in 1902 and was Russian until 1934, when the Soviet government granted it to Bulgaria. Next to the western part of the church, there is a 53-metre-tall bell tower with 17 bells, the largest of which weighs 1643 kg. The bells were cast from shell casings collected from the nearby battlefields.

Pleven is the site of some of the most significant events of the War of Liberation (1877–1878) in terms of their duration, the number of troops involved, sacrifices made, and especially their decisive role in the outcome of the war.

The Mausoleum Ossuary St George the Victorious is located in the centre of Pleven. Its foundation stone was laid in 1903, and it was inaugurated in 1907. Its central dome is 24 m tall, and it is topped by an iron cross. On the north and south sides of the mausoleum are large memorial plaques with the names of the Russian and Romanian regiments, the officers, and the number of soldiers who died at Pleven. High on its corners in bronze letters are inscribed the towns, villages, and battlefields where the fiercest and most decisive battles were fought. An eternal flame burns in front of the mausoleum.

Other notable temples in Pleven are **the Church of Holy Trinity, the Metropolitan Cathedral of St Nicholas** – features a magnificent iconosta-



Church-Monument of Shipka

sis, the work of Tryavna masters, and 68 icons by Dimitar Zograf – and **the Church of St Paraskeva**.

Since Antiquity, **Stara Zagora** is known by many names – Borui, Beroe, Augusta Traiana, etc. The city, enlightened by St Apostle Carpus, has existed since Neolithic times. The best-preserved Neolithic dwellings in the whole of Europe, 8000 years old, can be seen there. During the Russo-Turkish War (1877–1878), one of the most decisive battles was fought here, which was the baptism of battle of the Bulgarian Opalchenie in defence of the Samara Flag. Nearly 15 000 people died in it. In Stara Zagora, one can visit several interesting temples, such as **Holy Trinity, the Metropolitan Cathedral St Nicholas of Myra, and The Entrance of the Mother of God into the Temple**.

The Monasteries of the Balkan Mountains

Every year, thousands of believers from all over the country flock to the **Troyan Monastery of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God** to worship the **wonderworking icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Three Hands**. Pilgrims come from all over the world. According to the monastery chronicle, the monastery was founded in 1600. The dwellings were built at different times but are combined in a common architectural complex. Its highlight is the four-floor bell tower, built in 1865. On the temple frescoes worked Dimitar and Zahari Zograf, who has left us his self-portrait. The iconostasis deserves special attention, as it is a true masterpiece of wood carving art. The Holy Monastery played an important role in the liberation struggles during Ottoman rule. The cell where the members of the secret revolutionary committee, founded by Vasil Levski in 1872, gathered has been preserved. The Troyan Monastery is the third largest in Bulgaria after the Rila and Bachkovo monasteries and is a stau-

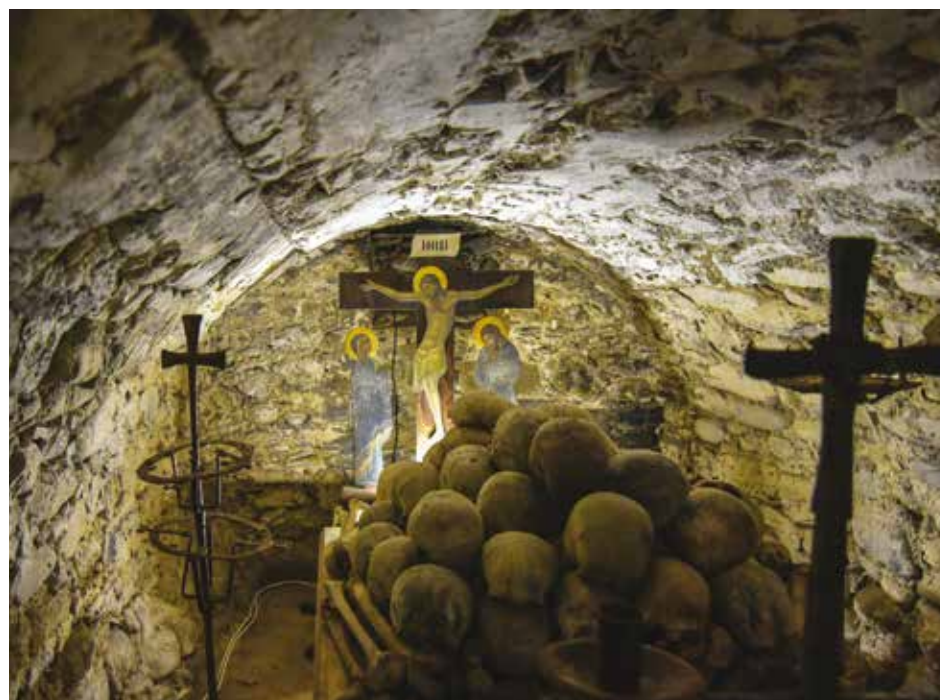


The wonderworking icon




The legend about the wonderworking icon of the Blessed Virgin Mary of the Three Hands claims that the icon of the Mother of God was brought by a hieromonk from the Holy Mountain, who passed through there on his way to Wallachia (today's Romania). Intrigued by the news that a pious hermit lived in the Troyan area of the Balkan Mountains, the holy hermit decided to stop by. When the time came to continue on his way, the monk saddled his horse and set off. However, his horse stumbled and fell. The monk saw a sign from God in this. He postponed his journey and returned to the hermit. After a while, the monk decided to set out again, but the horse again stumbled and fell in the same place.

The monk realized that the icon did not want to leave that place. So, the shrine remained near Troyan, and the hermit and some of his followers built a small wooden church in which they served. People from the surrounding villages came to worship before the holy icon, which had the ability to heal. Gradually, the number of pilgrims and settlers grew. Cells and an inn were built for them. This is how the Troyan Monastery came into being.

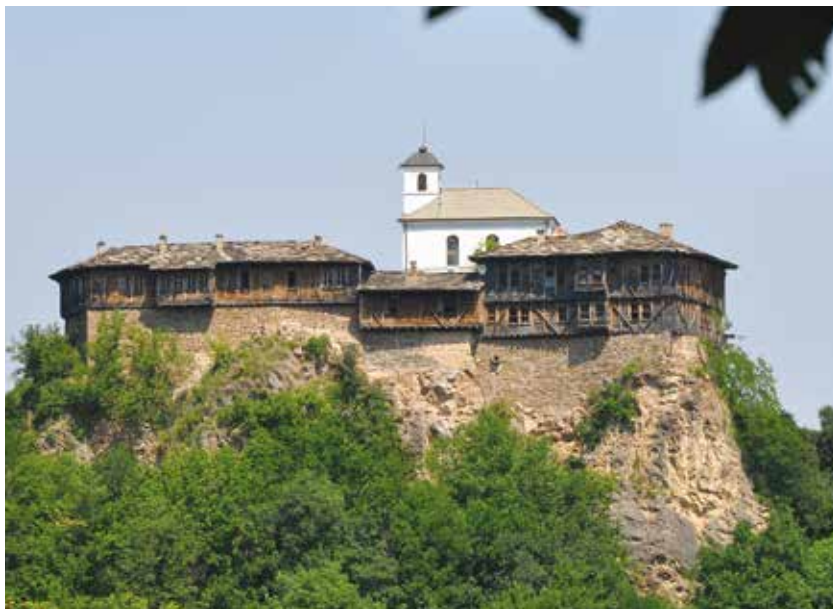


The Troyan Monastery of the Assumption of the Holy Mother of God

rope region monastery. Here is the tomb of Maxim, Patriarch of Bulgaria and Metropolitan of Sofia.

 **The Glozhene monastery of St George the Victorious** is one of the most beautiful Orthodox Christian monasteries in Bulgaria. Persecuted by the Tatars, in 1224, the Kiev Knyaz George Glog settled in these places with the blessing of Tsar Ivan Asen II. The Knyaz founded a settlement (today's village of Glozhene), and 1 km away in the area of Gradishte, he built a small fortress and a monastery, which was abandoned after the arrival of the Ottomans. The monastery of St George the Victorious was built in the early 18th century on the hardly accessible rock terrace above the village. From a distance, it resembles a feudal castle and is reminiscent of the monasteries of Mount Athos. Vasil Levski, who founded a revolutionary committee in the Glozhene, often stayed there. The Apostle of Freedom hid in a specially built hideout in the monastery under extremely harsh conditions for months. Today, the hideout has been turned into a museum. A copy of **the ancient icon of St George the Victorious**, brought by Georgi Glog, is exhibited at the monastery. During the Revival, the monastery was an important literary centre with cell schools in the surrounding area, part of its

The Glozhene monastery of St George the Victorious





The Glozhene monastery of St George the Victorious


The Glozhene monastery of St George the Victorious



metochion, and had a rich library. Among the written monuments originating from it are a Kyiv Pechersk Gospel from 1716 and rich liturgical literature. Two bronze seals with the monastery's designation as a Kyivan monastery are also preserved.

 **The Chekotin Monastery of St Archangel Michael** is located near a neighbourhood of the same name, 20 km northeast of Botevgrad. It has existed since the time of the Second Bulgarian Kingdom. The monastery had close ties with the nearby fortress of Bozhenishchi Urvich. The monastery was twice destroyed and rebuilt. Its church is the only building that has partially survived until today. It is a typical 12th–13th century single-aisle basilica with an atrium, apse, and semi-cylindrical vault. The ventilation outlets in its four corners are impressive. The northern niche hides a secret door and an underground tunnel. The wooden iconostasis is richly carved by masters of the Tryavna school. In the temple are kept two wonderworking icons – of St Yoan Rilski and of St Tatiana.

 **The Etropole Monastery of Holy Trinity** is located at the foot of the Balkan Mountain peak Cherni Vrah, 5 km from Etropole. It is also known by the name Varovitets. The temple is one of the oldest in Bulgaria, it was founded in 1158. The founding of the monastery is connected to St Yoan Rilski, who settled in one of the caves in the nearby area of Varovitets before retiring as a hermit to the Rila Mountain. Today, the Etropole Monastery is active. The monastery church Holy Trinity was built in 1858 by the master Ivan Boyanin from Bratsigovo. It is a cruciform, three-aisled building with five domes. On the north and south sides of the nave are two chapels of St Yoan Rilski and of Sts Cosmas and Damian. The frescoes in the interior date back to 1907, and many interesting icons have been preserved. The monastery preserves **relics of the Sts Cosmas and Damian**. At the end of the 16th and the beginning of the 17th century, the Etropole school of literature developed there.

 **The Vrachesh Monastery of St Forty Martyrs** is situated on the banks of the Cheshkovitsa River, below the Murgash peak, in the Western Stara Planina Mountain. It was built after the victory of Tsar Ivan Asen II at the Battle Klokotnitsa in 1230. In the 18th century, it was razed to the ground and sank into oblivion. At the end of the 19th century, it was rebuilt. It preserves **a part of the relics of one of the martyrs and a wonderworking icon of Holy Mother**, discovered during the excavations of the old monastery. The icon is brought out for worship on major church feasts.

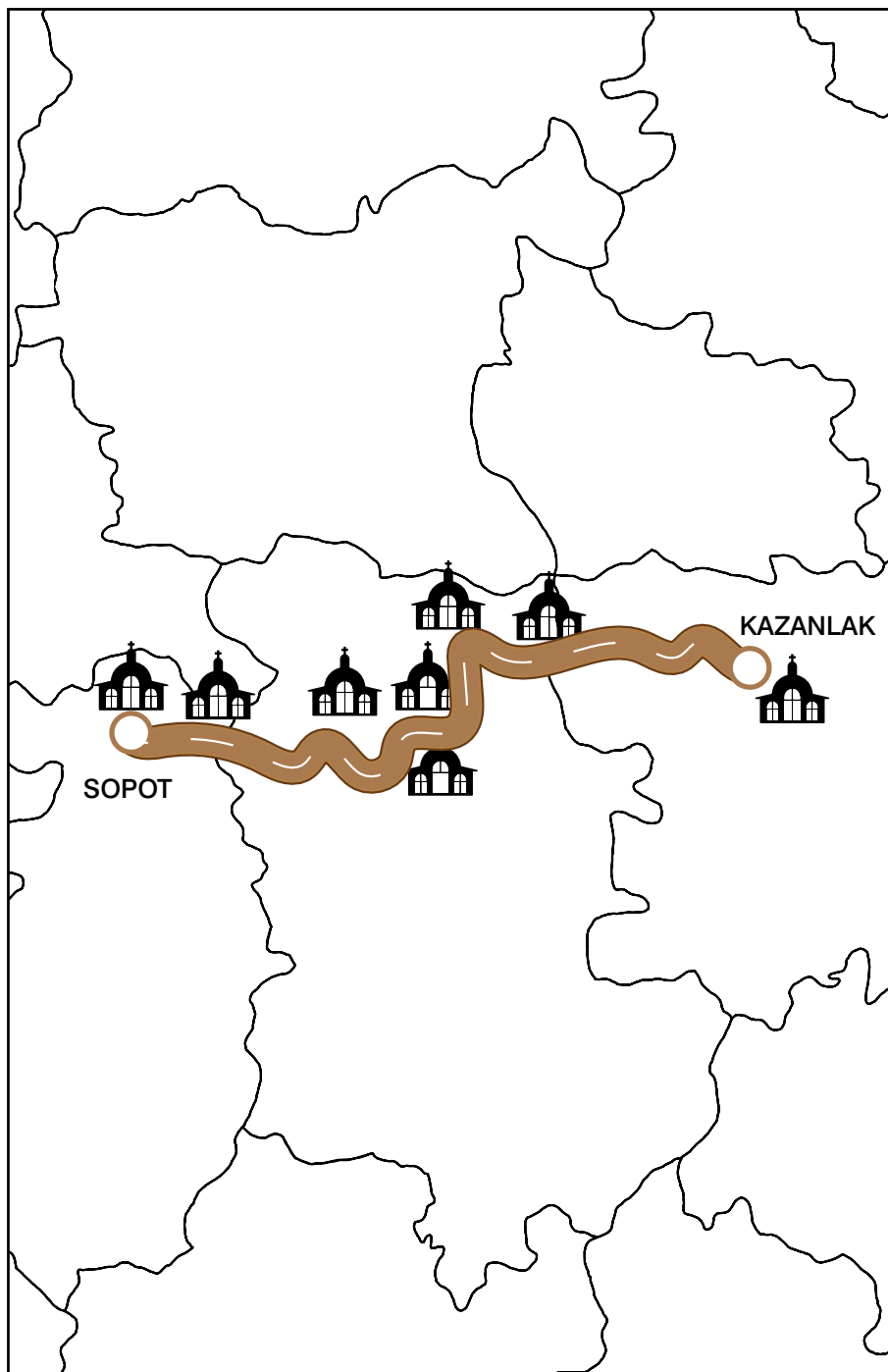


The Etropole Monastery Holy Trinity





THE ROSE VALLEY



In the footsteps of the Bulgarian revolutionaries

The Rose Valley covers a vast area locked between the Stara Planina Mountain and the Sredna Gora Mountain range. It is best known for its traditions in the cultivation of roses, one of the symbols of Bulgaria. The town of Kazanlak is considered the capital of the Rose Valley, where every year the Rose Festival is celebrated. This is a street festival that attracts thousands of tourists not only from Bulgaria, but from the whole world. Due to its geographical features, the region has played a key role in Bulgarian history. In the region are the rebellious towns of Koprivshtitsa, Panagyurishte, Strelcha, Klisura, which were the scene of the most important events of the April Uprising of 1876; it was the most significant event in the national liberation struggles of the Bulgarian people. This region also includes Karlovo and Kalofer, where the two greatest national heroes, Vasil Levski and Hristo Botev, who sacrificed their lives for the liberation of Bulgaria, were born. Both the many museums and the Orthodox churches in these Bulgarian towns remind us of the heroic times of 1876.





The Revival church of St George in Panagyurishte

⛪ **The Church of the Entrance of the Holy Mother of God** is in the centre of **Panagyurishte**. It is a one-aisle basilica with a colonnade, burnt down during the April Uprising. It was rebuilt in 1878–1880 by masters from Bratsigovo and is painted and decorated with icons from Samokov Masters. The church impresses with its unique frescoes and beautiful golden domes.


⛪ The Revival **Church of St George** in Panagyurishte is the cathedral of the town. It is in the heart of the Panagyurishte spiritual district. The church is a three-aisled pseudo-basilica with one apse. It impresses with its huge size and sturdy construction.


⛪ **The Church of the Holy Mother of God (Assumption of the Mother)** is the oldest church in the rebellious town of **Koprivshitsa**. The building is partly dug into the ground and was built in 1817 on the foundations of an older temple. Four of its icons – Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary, St Yoan





The Church of the Holy Mother of God Mary in Koprivshitsa

Rilski, St George, and St Eustace Horserider – have been painted by Zahari Zograf. The wood-carved iconostasis was made by Hadji George of Tryavna in 1821. The church has the status of a monument of Bulgarian culture.

 **The Church of St Nicholas in Koprivshtitsa** is dedicated to St Nicholas of Myra. Construction began in 1842 and lasted two years. It is known as the New Church because it was built after the older Church of St Mary. It is a domeless, three-aisled basilica with three apses on the east side.

 **The Temple-Monument of St Archangel Michael in Strelcha** is one of the biggest landmarks of the town and has the status of an Architectural monument of culture of national importance. On the northern facade of the temple there are memorial plaques to Strelcha citizens who died in the April Uprising, the Balkan Wars and the First World War.

 Emperor Diocletian's favourite town of **Hisarya**, famous for its 22 mineral springs, also has a remarkable orthodox church called **St Pantaleon**. It was built in 1889. Most impressive are the frescoes depicting almost all the biblical stories. In the period 1999–2004, the church was renovated and painted outside and inside.


 **The Starosel Church of St Nedelya** is 20 km from Hisarya. It was built in 1819. It was burnt down along with the whole village in 1876 and rebuilt 10 years later. Its unique icons are the work of the best Bulgarian icon-painter Nikola Danchov.




Detail of a fresco in The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin in Karlovo, where Vasil Levski served as hierodeacon



The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin in Karlovo

 **The Church of the Assumption of the Virgin in Karlovo** was completed in 1851. The iconostasis of the church is made of walnut. There are no frescoes, but there are original and restored icons by representatives of the Samokov art school. Vasil Levski served hierodeacon Ignatius as in the church. The Sunday school of the church keeps one of the rare photographs of the Apostle.

 **The Church of St Nikola** in Karlovo was erected in 1847. The icons were painted by the Revival painters Nikola Dospevski and Ivan Zografski. The large icons, the iconostasis, and the bishop's throne are the work of

icon painters and carvers from the Debar art school. In the courtyard of the church is the grave of Gina Kuncheva, the mother of Vasil Levski.

🏛️ **The Kalofer Male Monastery of the Nativity of the Mother of God** is located 7 km north of **Kalofer**. The holy monastery was founded in 1640. It was razed three times. In its present form, it dates back to 1881. There is a healing holy well with a Chapel of St Pantaleon. The Kalofer male monastery is an active monastery and consists of a church, residential, and farm buildings. In the temple is kept **a part of the relics of St Nectarios of Aegina**.

🏛️ In Kalofer, the central place is occupied by the **Church of the Holy Mother of God**. It is located to the right of the hill on which the majestic monument of Botev stands. The church was built in 1848 on the foundations of an older church.

🏛️ **The Monastery of the Entrance of Mother of God in Sopot** is located about a kilometre north of the town. Its origins are associated with the medieval fortress of Kopsis (today's Anevsko Kale). The Sopot Monastery was endowed with rights and charters by the Bulgarian Tsar Smilets.

The monument of Hristo Botev in Kalofer



Nowadays, it is an active nunnery. Vasil Ivanov Kunchev from Karlovo (Vasil Levski) was ordained a deacon there and took the monastic name Ignatius. The monastery had a girls' school where Nedelya Petkova (Baba Nedelya or Grandma Nedelya), one of the first Bulgarian teachers, taught. The monastery was described by Ivan Vazov in his novel *Under the Yoke*.

🏛️ **The Kazanlak Monastery of The Entrance of the Mother of God** was founded in the period 1864–1866. The church was built in 1857–1866 by Debar builders under the direction of master Kozma. It was designed by a Russian architect. The frescoes in the dome, too large for the size of the temple, were made by Georgi Danchev. The large, beautiful, carved wooden iconostasis was made in Russia. After the Liberation, the monastery was rebuilt and expanded by constructing new buildings. Today, it is permanently active and inhabited by nuns.

🏛️ In Kazanlak, **the Temple of Holy Trinity** also deserves attention. The church has three thrones dedicated to Holy Mother of God, St Athanasius of Alexandria, and St Archangel Michael.

The Kazanlak Monastery of The Entrance of the Mother of God





On the path of faith – Pilgrimage path „Rila Miracle Worker“

„The beginning of the path is not yet a path...“ – these words of St. Basil the Great sound like a spiritual call for anyone who seeks the truth, faith and meaning of their journey. For fifteen years now, pilgrims from different parts of Bulgaria have been gathering every summer to follow in the footsteps of St. Yoan Rilski, the most beloved Bulgarian saint, heavenly patron and example of spiritual determination, mercy and faith.

This year, the pilgrimage takes on a new, broader direction – thanks to the blessing of the Bulgarian Orthodox Church, with the constructive participation of dozens of institutions and with the support of the Presidential Administration. The beginning, laid 15 years ago, has grown into a national movement for the revival of Christian memory and spirituality. The aspiration is for this undertaking, even if only in some sections, to become year-round and for families and different groups to walk along it, to taste the grace of the Bulgarian land. The road to the Rila Holy Monastery will be only the first of a number of pilgrimage routes that will connect all of Bulgaria – from temple to temple, from monastery to monastery, from heart to heart.

This pilgrimage route – a sacrament in motion – begins on August 1st from the church of St. Sophia in the capital and lasts six days. The route partly follows the path along which the relics of the saint were solemnly transferred to the Rila Holy Monastery in 1469 and passes through the Vitosha, Verila and Rila mountains. The spiritual journey also passes through the villages of Yarlovo, Belchin and Klisura, where pilgrims find shelter, prayerful communion and warm hospitality.



With the blessing of the Holy Metropolitanate of Sofia and with the participation of the Faculty of Theology at the Sofia University „St. Kliment Ohridski“, the pilgrimage route „The Rila Miracle Worker“ has established itself as an event that unites the faith, history and living tradition of Orthodox Bulgaria. With a cross, an icon, and a banner in front, with prayer in our hearts, and with water blessings celebrated in the mountain valleys, this path becomes a prayerful ascent, an encounter with God and the spiritual heritage of our people.



Photos: Stefka Borisova

More information, both general and specific to the event, and photos can be found on the website: <https://rilskipoklonnik.bg/>

No one remains the same after such a journey. It is not important how many steps we take, but whether we dare to go. One step – and we are already on the road. The road of silence, of grace, of congregated prayer and of inner change. In the words of the Savior: „Whoever compels you to go one mile, go with him two“ (Matt. 5:41) – we believe that this is the mile of love and truth that sets us free.

Let us set off together to the sources of holiness!

Let us strengthen our faith on the blessed path to the Rila Holy Monastery!
Let us touch the miracle of a living and holy path – the path of the Rila Miracle Worker!

Prof. Dr. Pavel Pavlov
Ch. assistant Dr. Teodor Avramov

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